I SAVED TOO MANY GIRLS AND CAUSED THE LITTLE APOCALYPSE

5

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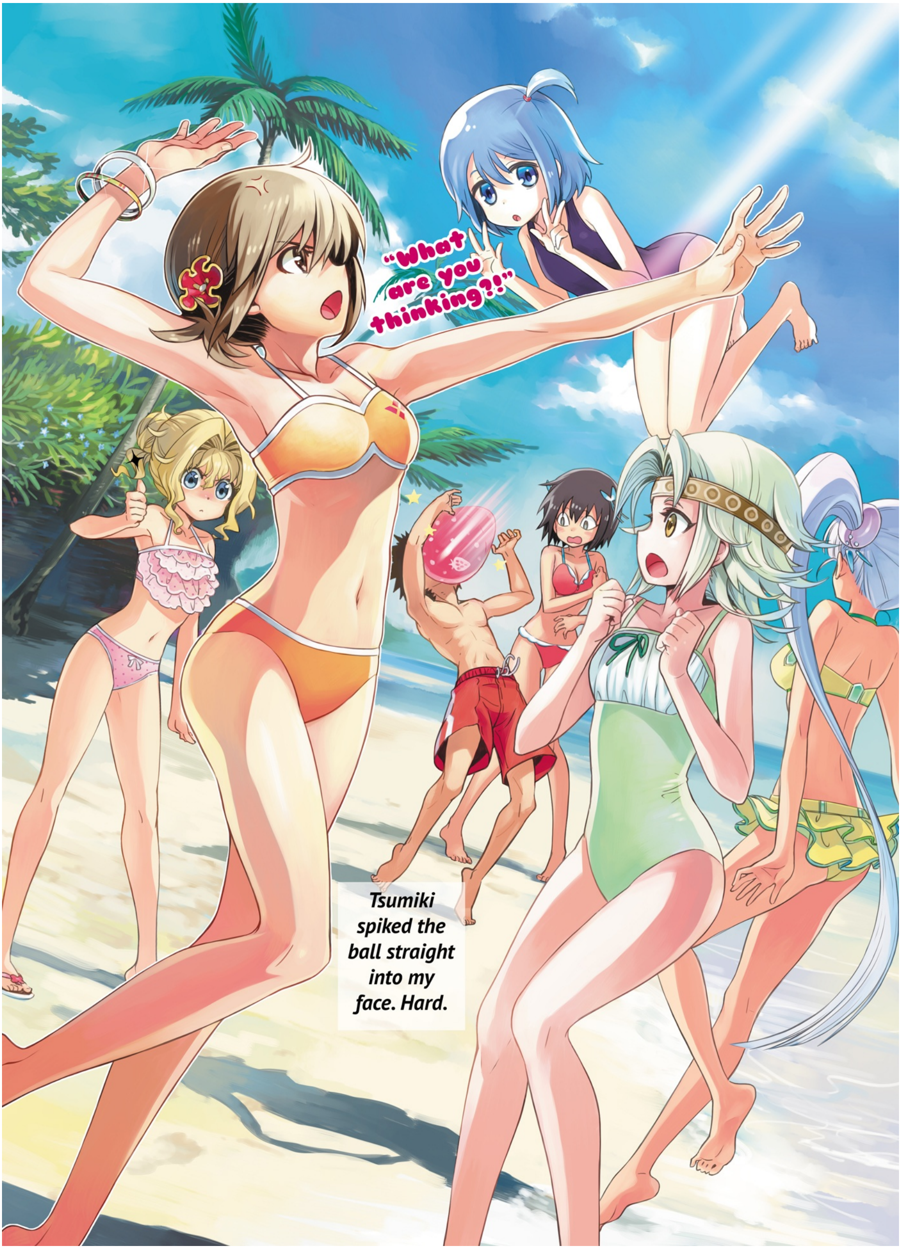
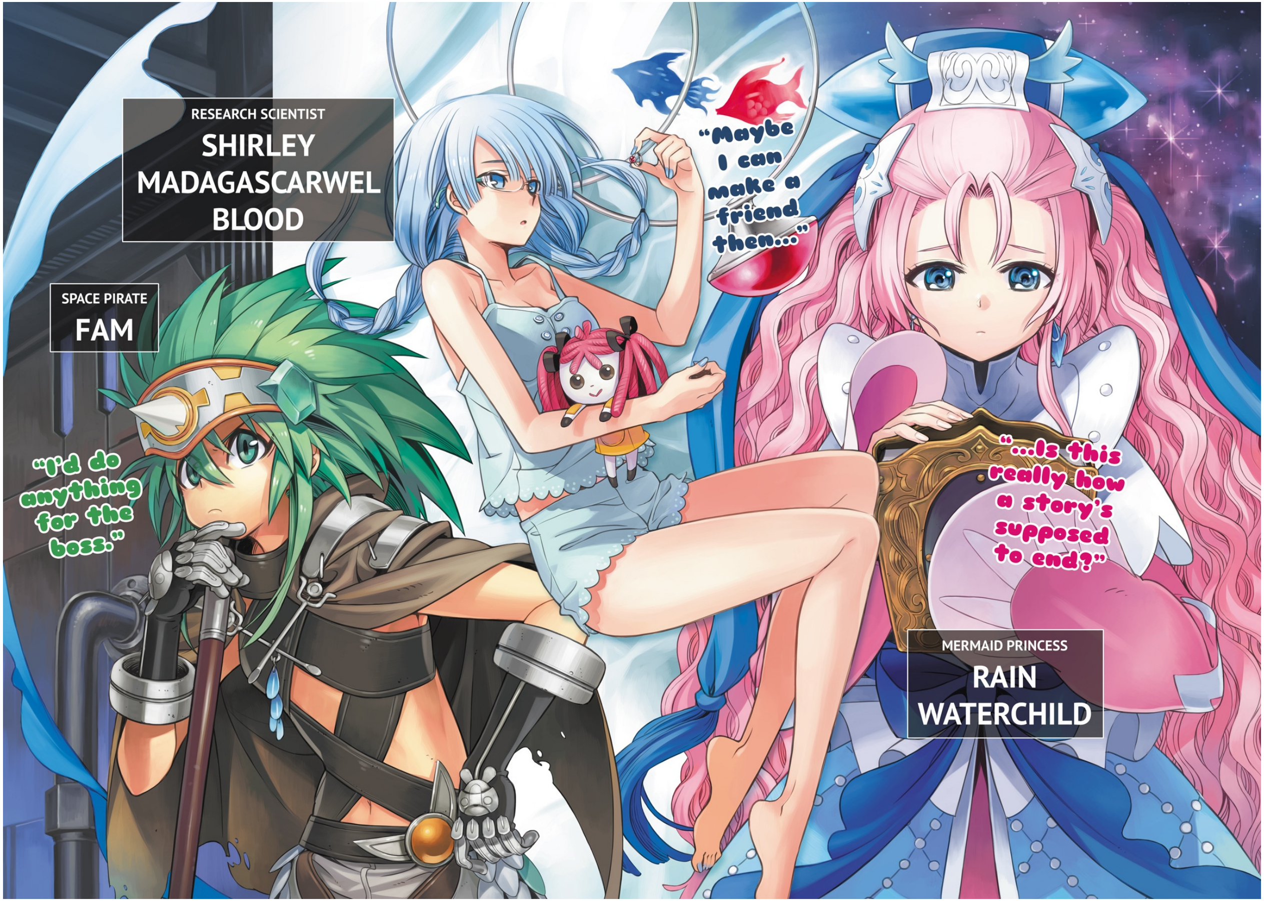
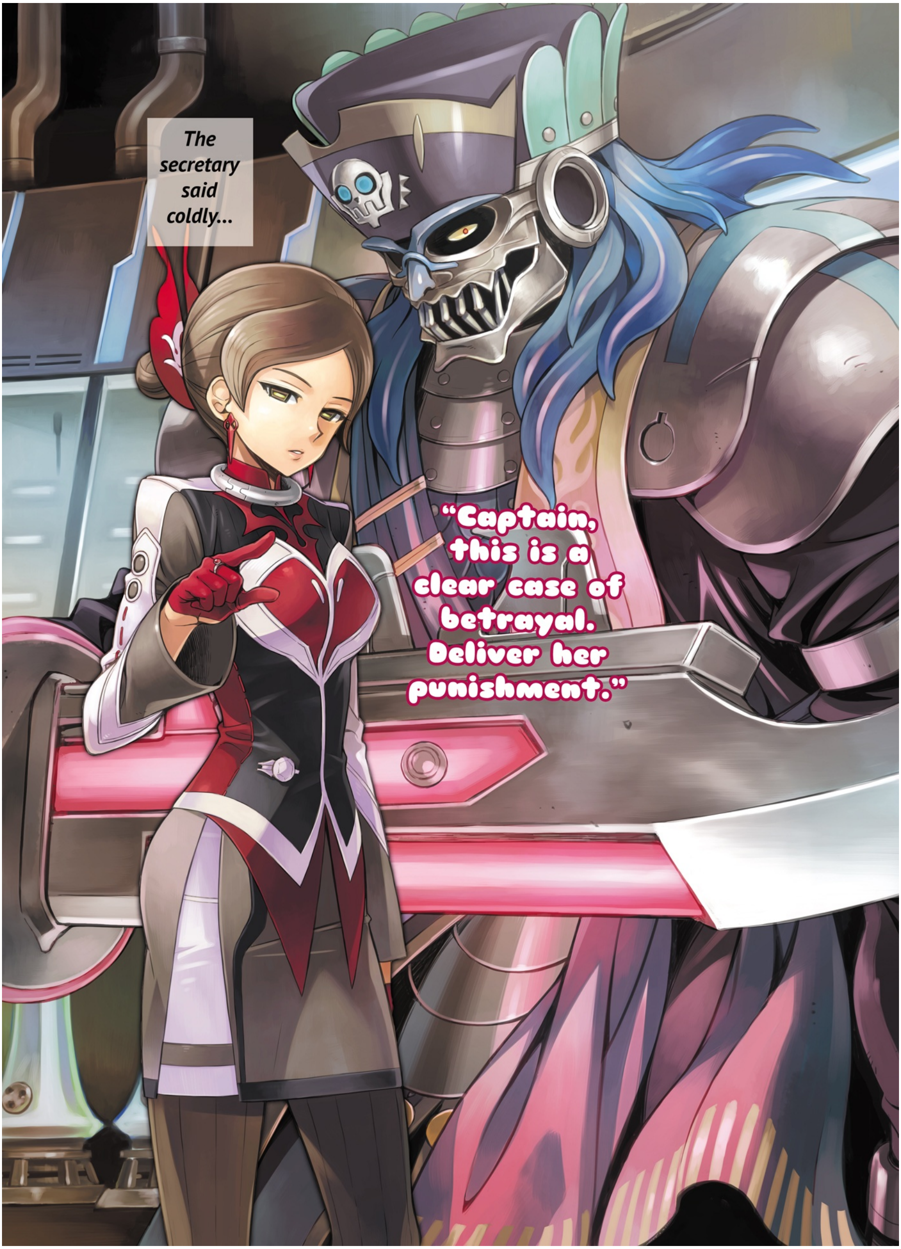


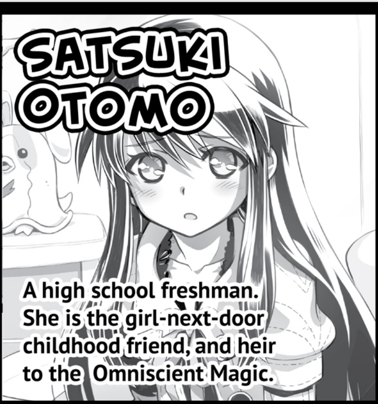
"What are you thinking?!"

Tsumiki spiked the ball straight into my face. Hard.


RESEARCH SCIENTIST
SHIRLEY MADAGASCARWEL BLOOD
SPACE PIRATE
FAM
"I'd do anything for the boss."
"Maybe I can make a friend then..."
"...Is this really how a story's supposed to end?"
MERMAID PRINCESS
RAIN WATERCHILD

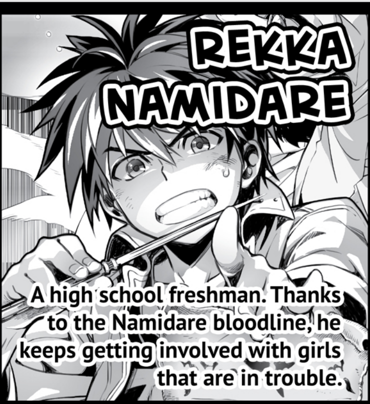

The secretary said coldly...
"Captain, this is a clear case of betrayal. Deliver her punishment."

ABOUT CHARACTERS



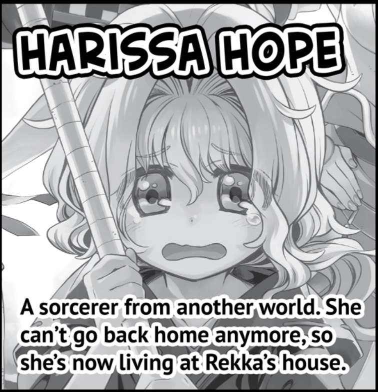
SATSUKI OTOMO

A high school freshman. She is the girl-next-door childhood friend, and heir to the Omniscient Magic.



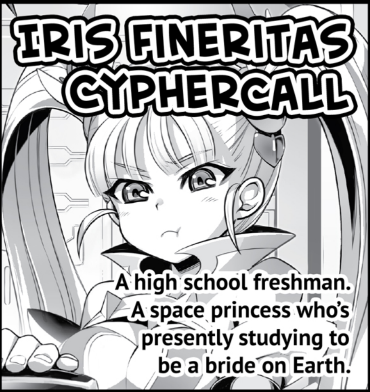
REKKA NAMIDARE

A high school freshman. Thanks to the Namidare bloodline, he keeps getting involved with girls that are in trouble.



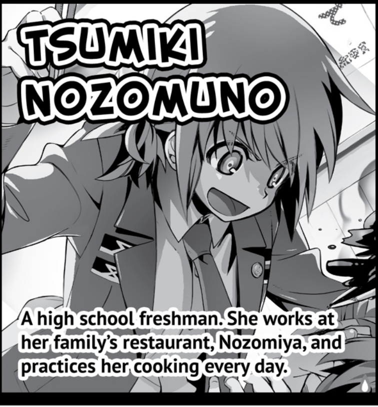
HARISSA HOPE

A sorcerer from another world. She can't go back home anymore, so she's now living at Rekka's house.



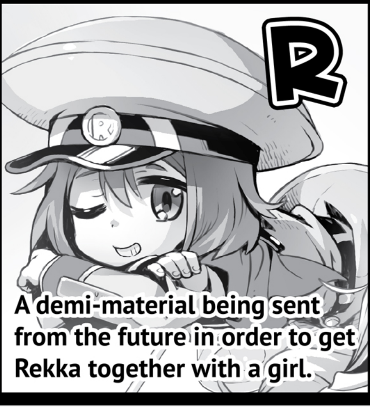
IRIS FINERITAS CYPHERCALL

A high school freshman. A space princess who's presently studying to be a bride on Earth.



TSUMIKI NOZOMUNO

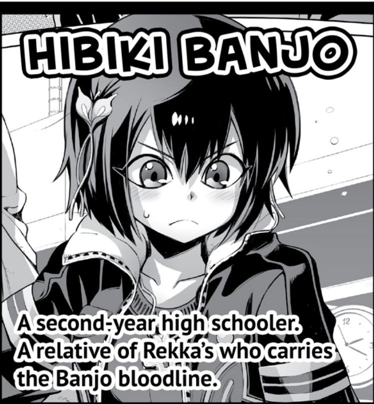
A high school freshman. She works at her family's restaurant, Nozomiya, and practices her cooking every day.



R

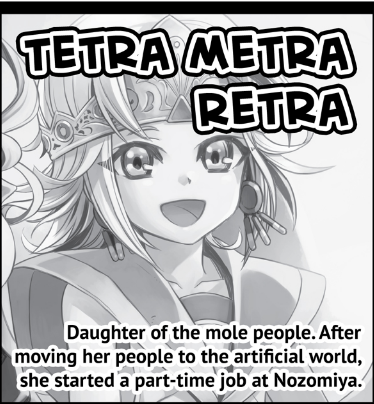
A demi-material being sent from the future in order to get Rekka together with a girl.

ABOUT CHARACTERS



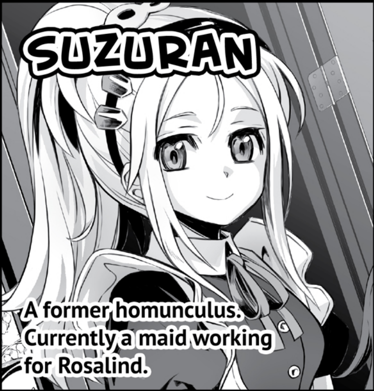
HIBIKI BANJO

A second-year high schooler. A relative of Rekka's who carries the Banjo bloodline.



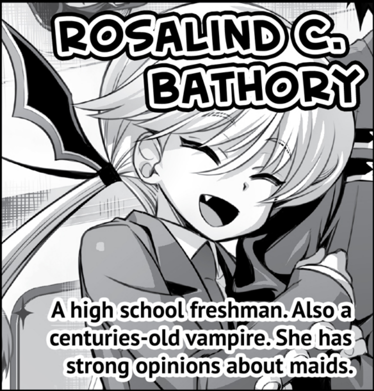
TETRA METRA RETRA

Daughter of the mole people. After moving her people to the artificial world, she started a part-time job at Nozomiya.



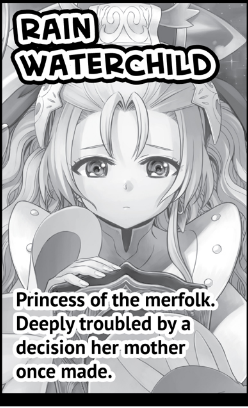
SUZURAN

A former homunculus. Currently a maid working for Rosalind.



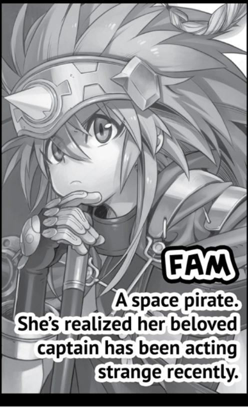
ROSALIND C. BATHORY

A high school freshman. Also a centuries-old vampire. She has strong opinions about maids.



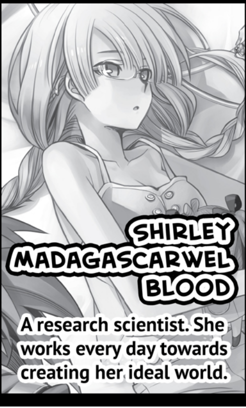
RAIN WATERCHILD

Princess of the merfolk. Deeply troubled by a decision her mother once made.



FAM

A space pirate. She's realized her beloved captain has been acting strange recently.



SHIRLEY MADAGASCARWEL BLOOD

A research scientist. She works every day towards creating her ideal world.

Prologue 0-1: Shirley Madagascarwel Blood

Shirley, a researcher for planet Estashion's governmental research agency, was heading back to her room after finishing her day's work.

"Whew... I'm so tired."

She collapsed on the bed and stretched herself out to relieve the exhaustion that had built up over the course of the day. Thanks to complicated circumstances, she'd been working with the highest levels of government ever since she was a child, but this latest project was especially taxing.

"The director said that once this was done, our ideal world would become a reality, so I have to do my best. But still..."

She tried to get herself fired up again, but gave up halfway through.

She thought about going somewhere to refresh herself, and instantly a list of entertainment facilities and hangouts in the city popped up on one lens of her glasses. Of course, the information wasn't actually displaying on the lens itself. The chip that was embedded in her brain was just receiving video information from the Estashionian government's advertising department. It appeared to be displaying on her glasses because she'd set that as the default location, figuring it would be easier to see.

After silently browsing through several potential leisure spots, Shirley shut off the broadcast. She'd thought about it, but in the end, she just didn't feel like going out.

And if she wasn't going to go out, she had no choice but to do something at home. It was a tall order considering there was nothing except for furniture in her room. Maybe she didn't really have any hobbies, but given that that was just the peculiar way she'd been brought up, it was hard not to feel sorry for her. Not that there was anyone around to sympathize.

"Hahh... Hm?"

She reached under her bed unconsciously, and her fingers touched something soft. Curious, she pulled it out to see that it was an old doll of hers.

"Wow... this brings back memories."

It was the one toy she'd been allowed as a child. Long ago in a white room just like this one, it was her only playing companion.

“Okay, Garnet, let’s trade rings,” a younger Shirley had said.

“Okay... Shirley,” the doll, Garnet, had answered in a faltering voice.

Shirley had taken the ring in the doll’s palm and exchanged it for the one she’d been holding.

“Heehee! Okay, now let’s seal the promise with a kiss.”

“Okay... Shirley.”

“...Mua.”

Shirley had kissed the doll’s cheek and sworn to love it forever. That was the memory that replayed in her head as she toyed with the doll’s hands now.

“Garnet never learned to be good at talking, did she?”

The doll’s brain was loaded with a memory accumulation AI that Shirley had developed. It was an artificial intelligence that learned different types of thought patterns via experience, and Shirley played with it to help it learn. At least, that’s the excuse she’d given. In fact, she’d just wanted a doll back then, and she’d created the AI to justify owning one. Of course, a quickly maturing child like Shirley soon graduated from playing house.

I was so lonely by myself back then, wasn’t I?

That was why she’d made Garnet. She’d wanted a friend.

But now that Shirley had grown up—though she was still only 16—and she wasn’t shorter than the adults anymore, she could talk to them normally. She had a lot of coworkers at the lab. She interacted with them almost every day, arguing with them about the current project or doing research with them...

“Hahh...”

I guess I still don’t have any friends...

“...Oh?”

As she was playing with the doll, she realized its pocket was bulging a little. She slipped her finger inside to find a pair of toy rings.

“Eternal love, huh?”

She still had no idea if such a thing even existed, much less for someone like her. Someone who wasn’t normal. But even so, at least...

“If the ideal world becomes real... maybe I can make a friend...”

She pressed her face against the pillow as she whispered those words. Nobody heard them. They simply echoed off the walls of the sterile, white room.

Prologue 0-2: Fam

An apprentice crewmember of the space pirates called the Seageists was cleaning the decks of their ship. This girl—Fam—was doing it the old-fashioned way, plunging a mop into a bucket filled with soapy water and swabbing the floor manually. These days, even pirates could get their hands on the cleaning robots that were everywhere in the Galactic Federation. Robots could clean the ceilings and walls just as easily as they could the floors, and they could keep the ship cleaner than any human could. It was actually inefficient to have Fam do it. This was simply her punishment for doing something stupid.

"Damn it!"

Fam panted heavily for a moment as she leaned on her mop. She'd only been tasked with cleaning the living quarters, but even after an hour's work, she felt like she was no closer to being done.

"Why! Do! I! Have! To...!"

With each over-emphasized word, she jerked the mop back and forth as rage and resentment flared in her eyes.

The hell's gotten into the boss, anyway?

Fam was thinking of the face of the captain of the Seageists, Squallow Low. She didn't know exactly what his face looked like, however, because he always covered it with a huge mask. After a grievous injury a long time ago, he'd become a full-body cyborg. The process had given him the ability to fight for dozens of hours at a time, but it also meant he couldn't go about his daily life without the help of machines. He needed the mask to help him see and hear, which was why Fam had never seen his real face.

But despite his gruff, scary looks, Fam could always sense the strength and kindness in his eyes. Maybe that was how she'd been able to tell that something wasn't quite right with Squallow lately.

She silently contemplated the matter.

Fam was once a homeless girl on a planet in an isolated corner of the universe. Theft, violence, starvation, discrimination... Those awful things were her daily life. There was never a hero to save her, until one day, she was indeed saved. It just wasn't a hero. In fact, it was the opposite. A pirate.

He told her his name was Captain Squallow, and then he said to her, "From now on, you're family." For the first time, there was light in her life.

I'd do anything for the boss. But why attack a planet like that? And why for some silly "treasure"?

Several hours ago, Squallow had gathered his crew together like he always did and told them all about their next attack. They were going to raid a certain planet and steal a treasure that slept there—something normal space pirates did all the time. Pirates took lives and treasures for their own pleasure. That was the life of a pirate. Lawless roguery.

But the Seageists were different. At least, that's what Fam had thought. This new plan wasn't how they used to do things. That's why she'd made it clear she was against it.

And the result of her dissent was that she was now stuck swabbing the decks. Given that the captain had absolute power aboard the ship, as far as punishments went, she'd gotten off easy. But she was still upset on a very deep level.

Barely any of the other leaders tried to stop the boss.

Fam recalled the almost unnatural silence after the captain had given his orders. Something was wrong with the Seageists. And Fam was scared of it.

"Fam."

"Wah!"

A sudden voice snapped her out of her moody thoughts, startling her enough that she accidentally kicked her bucket over in surprise. The dirty water sloshed over the floor. Now she'd have to clean it all over again.

"Who the hell...? Uh-oh."

She turned around angrily, only to be met with a woman in a suit. The sight seemed very out of place on a pirate ship. This was the "secretary" that Squallow had hired about a year ago... or something like that. It was odd for a pirate to hire a secretary, but Squallow was more than just a pirate. He also provided an education for the orphans he picked up, distributed the Seageists' booty, took care of the complaints and arguments that were always coming up from the crew's families, and plenty of other things. He had a full plate. That's why he'd found this woman—or more precisely, female android—to help him out. But for some reason, Fam didn't like her.

"...Do you need something?" Fam asked.

"I have a message from the captain: Enough cleaning. Get ready for the job."

The job, of course, was piracy. And by "get ready," he meant getting the weapons cleaned and prepped, among other things.

"Understood."

"That's all I have for you," the secretary said. She then left as quickly as she'd come.

Fam watched her go with a glare, then started to pick up her cleaning tools once she was sure the secretary was gone.

Even looking in those damn eyes of hers, I can never figure out what she's thinking.

Since she was an android, there was no probably no helping that part, but Fam knew there had to be some reason she felt this way.

I don't like her!

Fam frustratedly kicked the empty bucket as hard as she could. Droplets of dirty water flew everywhere, but since the bucket was mostly empty now, it didn't make things much worse than they already were.

Prologue 0-3: Rain Waterchild

It was a mere 50 years ago that planet Berano was registered to the Galactic Federation. Ninety percent of Berano's surface was covered in water. It was a peaceful, oceanic planet of perpetual summer. That is, it was until the arrival of space invaders changed everything.

As beautiful as it was, humble Berano was not a particularly developed planet, and the aliens with their vast technological superiority almost drove its inhabitants to extinction. Berano lacked resources, but just being a planet full of beautiful merfolk made it a target. And so, survival on Berano meant that there was a cruel decision to be made...

Ryugu Palace. The ocean floor of Berano.

Rain Waterchild, the merfolk princess, was at the top of the palace's tallest tower, flipping through an old, well-worn picture book.

"...The red fish and the blue fish, who were best friends, were thus separated."

It was a book her mother, Queen Muse, used to read to her all the time when she was little.

"The red fish prince and the blue fish princess swore they would meet again someday. The prince kept their promise in his heart as he took his people to another place. The princess also kept their promise in her heart as she watched him go. They both longed for the day when they would see each other once more."

And that was the end of the story. It was a sad ending.

"...Is this really how a story's supposed to end?"

Rain slammed the book shut. Her long, elegant eyebrows drooped as she then looked down at the town below the castle.

It was called Ryugu Palace City. It was now a developed resort destination, but the town she'd loved for so long had only become that way after Berano had registered with the Galactic Federation. The merfolk had originally just lived in the sea, but now they inhabited an undersea city surrounded by a pressurized dome. It was a popular tourist spot that offered all kinds of services and entertainment for visitors. The merfolk dance in particular was the most popular draw in the city.

Even Rain's home, Ryugu Palace, had been turned into a high-class inn befitting such a resort. Only the highest floor of the palace where the royal family lived had been spared. Rain herself wasn't old enough to work yet, but eventually she would have to help her mother run things.

That was how much Berano had changed. Rain didn't think that change was a bad thing, but the decision that Berano… the decision that her mother had made to bring about that change was a cruel one. That's how it seemed to her, especially looking over the city now.

"There you are, Rain."

"Mother…"

Her mother appeared at the entrance of her room almost as if Rain's thoughts had summoned her.

Muse was the queen of the merfolk, and she was the most beautiful of them all. Of course, Rain had inherited that beauty. But in her current mood, that beauty seemed terribly tainted to her.

"What's wrong…?" Muse began to say, but she pursed her lips when she saw the book in Rain's hands. "Never mind. I won't ask."

Today was a study day. Rain was supposed to be learning history. Today was the day she would learn what happened to planet Berano before she was born. Her mother knew all that.

"Mother, why… why did you make such an awful decision?"

"There was no other way for this planet to survive," Muse answered. Her voice was resolute.

But Rain still couldn't accept it.

"But… But wasn't there anything else you could do?"

"Perhaps there was."

"Then…!"

"There's always some small possibility there's another way, but that doesn't affect the choices you have to make." Muse walked over to Rain and looked her dead in the eye. "We chose what we thought was the best decision at the time. But if you think that what was the best choice for us wasn't the best choice for you, then find another answer."

"Another answer?"

"Our choice was to protect. Even if we couldn't protect everything, we chose to protect as much as we could. And even now, we're following the path we chose with all the strength we have."

"…"

In her mind, Rain took several steps back, overwhelmed by her mother's unwavering expression. But in reality, her feet were as unmoving as if they'd been sewn to the floor. All she could do was look back at her mother.

"Rain, you are my daughter. Your decisions will have a great effect on this planet and on the people who live here. If you remember nothing else, remember that. Only then will you be able to choose the path you walk, whether that's following in my footsteps or looking for another way."

"..."

Even as her mother left, Rain stood frozen in place.

Think...

She repeated what her mother had said back to herself.

That's right... Even if it was cruel, Mother chose to protect this planet. It's easy to criticize her, but criticism alone isn't a resolution.

Berano had a sad past, and its history had been carved by the hands of her mother. So what was she, her mother's daughter, supposed to do? What was important was to think, choose, and then act.

Rain silently looked back down at the picture book in her hands. What was it that she'd said to her mother when she'd read it to her as a child?

"Don't worry, Mommy."

"Hm?"

"Even if the prince and the princess never see each other again... If that happens, then I'll just find the prince and bring him to the princess."

"...I see. Then if that day comes, I'll ask for your help, okay?"

"Okay!"

Prologue 1

"A planet of eternal summer?"

"That's right. It's called Berano, and the sea there is really pretty."

It was the week after the school pool opened when Iris suggested we go swimming.

"But why swimming? We just went swimming in the school pool today."

"That pool's so small, though."

"Is it?"

The school pool was 25 meters long and had seven swimming lanes. It didn't seem small to me at all.

"I can swim from end to end in three seconds."

"Oh, so that's it."

Iris was from Finerita, a planet where everyone was super strong. A normal Earth pool wasn't good enough for her, it seemed.

"So let's go swimming in the sea this weekend!" she said.

"The sea, huh?"

It was only halfway through June, but the weather had definitely been muggy over the past few days. I couldn't deny swimming would feel great. Iris said it was always summer on this planet she was talking about, and I certainly didn't hate the idea of getting an early taste of the season for myself.

"Hm, okay. Yeah. Take me with you to the sea."

"Yay!"

Iris began to hop up and down happily. She then whipped around towards the seat next to mine.

"So, Satsuki, are you coming?"

"You're inviting me? Really?" Satsuki looked up at Iris, a little surprised.

"You'd come whether I asked you to or not, right? You've been slowly leaning in towards us ever since I brought it up."

Satsuki suddenly turned red, adjusted her posture (she had indeed been leaning towards us), and coughed.

Iris shrugged. "Well, if you want to come, you can. Of course, that's only if you think you can beat me at the beach."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Heh heh," Iris chuckled a bit as she smiled provokingly. "Speaking of, Satsuki, how confident are you about your beach body?"

Satsuki gasped. Her eyes instantly widened and fixated on a certain part of Iris's uniform… I won't say where. And I definitely won't say that I did the same thing. I mean it. Really.

"Tch! So that's it… Fine. I accept your challenge!" Satsuki yelled.

"Just what I wanted to hear. I'll show you once and for all which of us is number one," Iris replied.

"So it's finally time for the swimsuit episode, huh? I need to go defrag and free up some memory in my brain," R added.

All of the girls, including R, were getting really worked up about this for some reason.

"Um, so… you're inviting everybody?"

And that was how we all ended up making plans to go to the sea for the weekend. The sea on a different planet, that is.

"Huh…"

Wait, doesn't "weekend" imply…

"Hold on, are we staying there overnight?"

"Yup, that's right. Berano's a resort, so there's all kinds of places to stay."

"That's not what I mean…"

Wasn't it a problem for a bunch of high school girls to be out somewhere with a guy overnight?

"Oooh, Rekka! You know they say summer vacation is the season when high schoolers become adults."

"It's not even summer vacation, R."

▽

Saturday morning.

My classmates Satsuki, Iris, Tsumiki, Hibiki, and Rosalind had gathered in front of my house, where they then met up with Harissa, Tetra, and Suzuran. Including me, there were nine of us in total. I'd tried to invite everybody who knew that Iris was an alien, but Chelsea was out of the country, and I couldn't get a hold of Lea.

"What does Lea spend her days doing now, anyway?" I asked.

"She said that she's usually traveling when she's not at Nozomiya, didn't she?" said Tsumiki.

"Yeah. She even brought me a wooden sword as a souvenir once," answered Tetra.

So Lea liked to travel, huh?

"If she had a phone, I would've invited her, too. It's too bad."

"Yeah."

I acknowledged what Tsumiki said with a nod. R then leaned in and put her lips up to my ear.

"It really is too bad, huh, Rekka? It's a crying shame you won't get to see that hot body in a swimsuit."

That's not what I meant!

I tried to shoo R away, then turned to Rosalind.

"What's up with Ulaula, by the way? I was sure all three of you would be here."

"She's staying home," Rosalind said coldly.

Unlike the other girls, Rosalind wasn't carrying any luggage. All her stuff was in the bag Suzuran was carrying.

You know, I was really starting to get used to seeing Suzuran in a maid outfit, but...

"Suzuran," I said.

"Yes? What is it, Sir Namidare?"

"Do you really need to wear your maid outfit on vacation?"

"I'm afraid it's my mistress's preference."

"Rosalind?"

"The very essence of a maid is in the uniform, I'll have you know."

I never did figure out where that vampire got some of her ideas. But I didn't need to ask to know that Suzuran always wore her maid outfit. The whole class was talking about the silver-haired maid who would appear at the shopping street sometimes.

"Everybody's here, right?" Iris asked.

When she saw that everyone was ready, she pressed the button to summon her spaceship. Just a moment later, it appeared above us.

"All right! Off we go on our two-day, one-night space voyage!"

▽

About five hours later, we came out of warp and found ourselves staring at a bright blue planet.

"So that's Berano?"

"Yup! Ninety percent of its surface is ocean, and it's always summer there. It's registered as part of the Galactic Federation, too."

"Planet Finerita is part of the Galactic Federation, as well, right?" I vaguely remembered hearing something about that before.

"Yup, yup. Well, it doesn't hold a council seat like Finerita or Satamonia. It's registered as a sub-planet of planet Estashion, I think."

"A sub-planet?"

"Hmm, what would you call it on Earth? A colony? No, that's not quite right... Anyway, Estashion is one of the 72 members of the council, and Berano is under their protection."

"I see."

As I was talking to Iris, another spaceship went flying past us.

"Are they going to Berano, too?"

"It is one of the most famous resorts in the Galactic Federation, after all. Tourism is their biggest industry. The water is really pretty, but they put a lot of effort into customer service, too."

"Um, are we landing soon?" Harissa asked timidly from behind Iris.

"We can go down whenever we want. Did you get warpsick?"

"No, that's not it... I'm just not used to this 'spaceship' thing yet."

"I imagine. There weren't even planes on your home world," I said.

"All right, we'll get going then," Iris said as she pushed the control stick forward.

We circled around to the other side of Berano and made a quick descent, instantly breaking through the atmosphere. There didn't seem to be any large land masses on the planet, just lots of little islands that looked like cookie crumbs from a distance. There were well-maintained forests and beaches on each island, along with an inland pier for spaceships to dock. One of those islands was where we landed.

"Haaahh... I'm a little tired after that," I said as I unloaded my luggage. I yawned and took in a deep breath of fresh air from a strange, new planet.

"You can smell the salt from here, huh?" Hibiki said, walking over to me and stretching some.

"It really does feel like an ocean planet, although there are fewer people here than I expected."

We hadn't left the pier yet, but it still seemed surprisingly empty.

"There are plenty of spaceships docked here, though."

"Hm, you're right..."

Hibiki and I scratched our heads.

"What's wrong? We're going to the beach, guys." Iris beckoned to us, luggage in hand.

"Well, sounds like it's time to go."

"Yeah."

We put the matter out of our minds and headed towards the others.

"How do we get to the beach, anyway? We landed in the middle of the island, and it seems like a pretty long walk there."

"Don't worry, we can use a short warp."

Iris pointed to a round, mechanical dais. I watched as another group of people got on it and disappeared. I figured it must take you straight to the beach. We got in a short line to use it.

"Which beach will you set as your destination?" a mechanical-sounding voice asked when it was our turn.

"Can you go to beaches besides the one on this island?"

"You sure can," Iris said.

"Huh... That's pretty convenient."

"Anybody have any preferences?"

"Somewhere where the waves are quiet," Rosalind said.

Iris relayed the request to the machine, and it suggested a spot called "D-4 Beach." We decided to go for it and each got up onto the dais in turn. We found ourselves transported to a beach with calm, lapping waves. There were a few people here, too, but it still wasn't as busy as I'd expected a resort to be.

"Looks like we practically have the place to ourselves, huh? I bet we can do a lot of swimming," Satsuki said. She was holding her straw hat to her head to keep the wind from blowing it away.

"Well, that's true," I said.

Japanese beaches in the summer were like trying to swim through a crowd of people, so this was a welcome experience. There were even changing rooms and other amenities you'd hope to find at the beach.

"All right, let's all get changed and meet up again, okay?"

▽

I finished changing before the others and waited for them under a beach umbrella.

"They're sure taking a while," I said.

"Girls take a long time when they change," R replied.

She was in a weird position. She had her head buried in the sand, but the rest of her was sticking out. Wasn't it supposed to be the other way around? And could I still hear her with her head in the sand because she was only partially corporeal to begin with?

"More importantly, why are you wearing a school swimsuit, anyway?"

"I'm trying to meet customer demand," she said.

"Customer demand? I didn't even know you could change clothes."

"That's a rude thing to say to a girl. You probably never noticed, but I change my army uniform every day. They just happen to all have the same design."

How the hell was I supposed to notice then?

R popped her head out of the sand and took to reclining on it instead. Since she was wearing a school swimsuit, she'd taken off her military cap. When she looked up at me, I could see a small ponytail poking off the side of her head.

"I'm definitely looking forward to this, though."

"To what?"

"Don't play dumb. You want to see all the girls in their swimsuits, too, you pervert."

"You'd better take that back," I replied.

Then I heard the crunching sound of footsteps in the sand. I looked up and saw Satsuki. She was wearing a cardigan over her swimsuit.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Rekka."

"Hey. Where are the others?"

"Still changing. I'm first, huh?"

She smiled and sat down next to me on the mat, but she seemed oddly fidgety.

"...Is something wrong?"

"Huh?! N-No... It's nothing."

"But you seem really antsy. Do you want to go swimming that badly?"

"That's not it!"

For some reason, Satsuki was yelling instead answering normally. What had gotten into her?

"Isn't there something else you should be saying to her, Rekka?" R let out an exasperated sigh.

What?

"...No, don't give up here," Satsuki whispered to herself.

She suddenly stood up in front of me and began to unbutton her cardigan. And then...

"H-Howwh dohh youhh wwike mwy shwimshoot?!" she spat out, tripping over her own tongue.

"W-Well..."

I was a little caught off guard, but I stood up and took a good look at her swimsuit from top to bottom. It was a white bikini, a rare choice for a quiet girl like her. The ribbons on her chest and the sides of her hips were cute, though. Actually, it looked like they might come undone if she moved the wrong way. It was weirdly exciting.

"I think it's cute. It's kind of a nice change of pace."

"...Really?"

"Yeah. You usually just wear dresses."

We both blushed at each other, but it didn't last long. I was suddenly very distracted by the sensation of two soft somethings leaning up against my back.

"Guess who!"

"Iris, what are you doing?!" Satsuki yelled her name before I could even get a word out.

I should've known it was Iris! Wait, that meant the two small mountains I felt pressing against my back were... her breasts?!

"Uwah-wah!"

I panicked and tried to squirm out of her grasp, but ended up getting my foot caught on the beach mat and tripping.

"Aww, you don't have to run away!"

No, I had to get out of there. And fast. I felt like my heart was going to burst. The feeling was more… direct… than usual. I turned around to say something to her.

"Iri—Gah!"

"What's wrong?"

Turns out Iris was a knockout in a swimsuit. It wasn't that the swimsuit was amazing. She just looked amazing in it. The thin fabric made her seem even bouncier than usual. It was scary.

"Hm? Is there something weird with my suit?"

Iris saw my mouth opening and closing like a goldfish's. She snapped the straps on her swimsuit as she inspected it, making her breasts jiggle.

"I-Iris... Don't do that..."

"Why not?"

"It's bad. For a lot of reasons."

It was really bad. I felt like I was about to get a nosebleed. But yet again, the feeling was short-lived. Whatever remnants of the pleasant sensation I'd felt on my back were suddenly replaced with a cold chill up my spine.

"Rekka!"

"Rekka!"

"Sir Rekka!"

"Rekka!"

"Sir Namidare!"

The other girls were surrounding me with terrifying looks on their faces. Even Harissa and Suzuran looked mad.

Hold on a second. Was this my fault? Really?

"You certainly seem to be enjoying Iris's swimsuit, Rekka."

There was a mix of anger and frustration in Satsuki's expression as she shot a quick glance towards Iris. Iris just stuck out her chest with a satisfied grin.

"Tch...!"

Satsuki's fists were trembling as if she was trying to control her anger. For some reason, those tiny fists struck more fear into my heart than any dragon or demon ever had.

"P-Please forgive me..."

I got the feeling I was in mortal danger, so I figured it was best to get on my knees and beg for my life right then and there.

▽

It turned out that our beach day, which had begun with me getting on my knees and begging for mercy, was perfect for swimming. Before long, everyone was enjoying themselves, and the looming, murderous tension in the air dissipated. Except Rosalind and Suzuran, everyone took to a game of beach volleyball.

"I've got this one!" I yelled as I ran for the ball that had just sailed over my head. I gave it a firm pass.

"Uwah! It's coming my way!" Harissa ran to the left and right, kicking up sand with each step as she went for the ball.

"Hmm... Harissa's chest still has room to grow, but the pink swimsuit looks good, doesn't it? The frills on the chest are very cute."

They sure were. Harissa had actually just borrowed one of Satsuki's old swimsuits, but the pink color looked great on her. Except... when R said that, it sounded kind of dirty. Maybe I just couldn't get past her usual shenanigans.

"Got it!"

Hibiki leaped straight up into the air and tapped Harissa's shaky pass. Out of all of us, she was the best player after Iris.

"Hibiki's tight body and midriff are cute, too, huh? And then there's the way her breasts bounce when she jumps."

"Hmm..."

"Huh? W-Wait, Rekka! What are you staring at?"

Suddenly my eyes met Hibiki's, and she scrambled to cover her chest and midriff.

"S-Sorry!"

I was staring at the bouncing, and I didn't even realize it!

"What are you thinking?!"

"Gwah!"

Tsumiki spiked the ball straight into my face. Hard.

Maybe I imagined it, but the second I landed on my back, I thought I saw somebody giving me a thumbs-up.

"Good grief! We didn't come to the beach just for you to sexually harass people!"

"No, um... I'm sorry."

Part of it was R's fault, but it was true I'd been staring at Hibiki's chest, so I decided to just apologize. Tsumiki still gave me a dirty look anyway, but then she scoffed and turned away.

"So don't you have anything to say to me?" she demanded.

"Huh? About what?" I asked.

"Don't you feel like you should say something when you look at me?"

When I look at her? Did she mean her swimsuit? Um...

"It looks good on you. The orange is a cute color."

"Of course it's a cute color! That's why I bought it!"

"S-Sure..."

Somehow I only managed to make her more angry. Wh-What in the world...?

"Rekka, there are other things you could compliment besides the color of her swimsuit, right? Like how sexy you think her legs look, or how much you love that peek of cleavage."

No way. Tsumiki'd just gotten mad at me for staring at Hibiki. I couldn't possibly compliment her breasts now.

But R sure was staring at everybody's breasts a lot more than I was. Sometimes I really wondered if, deep down, R wasn't actually an old man or something.

"Rekka, how do I look?" Tetra asked.

"You look good, too, Tetra. Wait, you lived underground, right? Where did you get a swimsuit? Did you go buy one?"

"Yes. I went with Tsumiki to purchase one on Friday."

"I see. Yeah, it looks cute."

"Th-Thank you." Tetra put her hand to her cheek, a little embarrassed.

"A one-piece swimsuit, huh? It's a little plain, but it really highlights how young she is. It makes her look more like a lol—hrmna hrmm hrmm."

I could tell R was on the verge of saying something dangerous, so I put my hand over her mouth.

"O-Okay, let's get back to the game, shall we?" I laughed nervously, tossing the ball up into the air again.

We'd knocked it back and forth five or six times when the wind caught the ball and blew it from Satsuki towards me.

"Oops!"

I stepped to the side to take a shot at it, but I suddenly heard Satsuki gasp in surprise.

"Whoops!"

She was right in front of me. We'd both been so focused on the ball that we didn't see each other in time.

"Kyah!"

"Watch out!"

I tried to move out of Satsuki's way, but I lost my balance. I grabbed on to her to try and keep her from falling over. It was a good plan. It just... didn't work. I tumbled to the ground with Satsuki in my arms and landed on my back. Fortunately, we had the sand to cushion us.

"Ugh... Are you okay, Satsuki?"

"Y-Yeah..." she said in a voice that didn't sound okay at all.

I'd thought I'd kept her from hitting the ground too hard, but maybe it wasn't enough.

"What's wrong? Did you sprain your ankle or something?"

"No, I'm okay..." Satsuki said in a voice that was barely a whisper as she curled up in my arms.

Why was she burying her face like that so I couldn't see her expression?

I heard the other girls yell my name, but over the top of them all, I heard Iris scream, “How long are you going to keep holding her?!”

“Dgwah!”

For the second time today, I took a volleyball directly to the face.

▽

“Oww...”

I went back to the umbrella to take a break, cradling my stinging face in my hand. Iris’s spike was really something. The noise it made when it hit my face sounded more like a bowling ball than a volleyball.

“Welcome back, Sir Namidare,” said Suzuran, welcoming me with a cold can of soda from the cooler.

“Thanks, Suzuran.”

“You’re welcome.”

I sat down on the mat and held the cold can against my face.

“Oh... you’re back, Rekka?” Rosalind sat up on the mat.

“Yeah, I’m a little tired.”

“From the look of your forehead, that’s not the only reason.”

“Yeah, well...”

I guess it left a mark. It really was a hell of a hit.

“I see. Well, while you’re here, Rekka, can you put suntan lotion on my back?”

“Huh?”

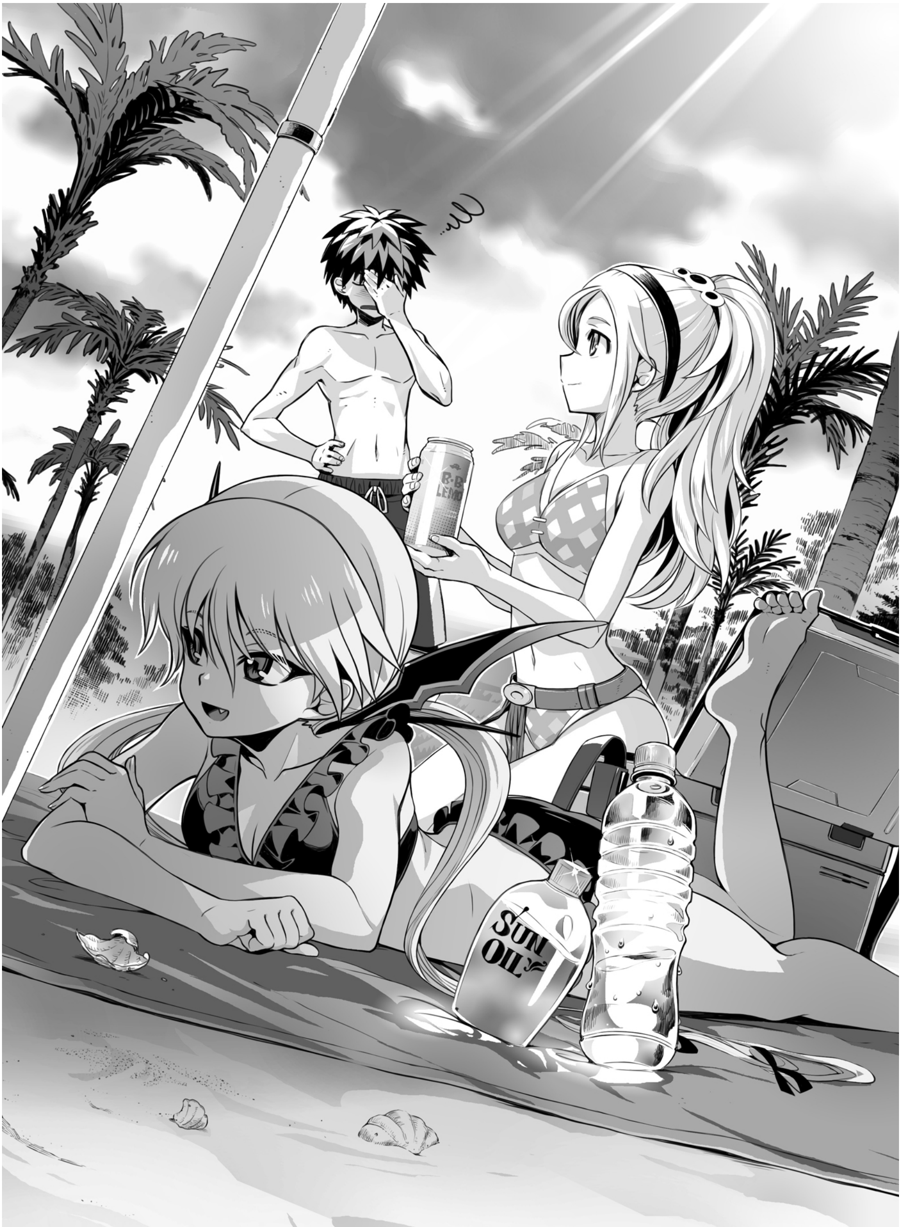
What was this vampire saying?!

“The sun doesn’t bother me, but I do get a nasty burn,” Rosalind said, handing me a bottle of lotion.

Huh? She wanted me to put this on her? In other words, she wanted me to touch her?

“No, no, no! Just ask Suzuran to do it! And if you don’t want a tan, wear a swimsuit that covers more skin like Tetra did!”

I started to panic as I tried to back away from her.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“Oh? What’s this? You can touch the other girls, but you can’t touch me?”

“No, that’s not what I meant...”

But without so much as another word, Rosalind took the liberty of laying herself across my thigh. She didn’t have any obvious protrusions like Iris did, but the way she was pressing into me was incredible.

“Now give up,” she said as she undid the top of her bikini and exposed her back.

If I move... that top is going to come off, isn’t it?

Just when it seemed like I was doomed, Suzuran plucked the bottle from my hand.

“That’s going too far, Mistress. Sir Namidare, please leave this to me.”

“Thanks.”

Suzuran... I’m so glad you’re here.

But then Rosalind cleared her throat in a deliberate manner.

“Come to think of it, Suzuran, you’re rather pale, too. If you go out into the sun like that, you’ll turn bright red. Why don’t you have Rekka put some suntan lotion on you, as well?”

Suzuran’s hand froze just as she opened the bottle.

“...Suzuran?”

“I’m terribly sorry, Sir Namidare. The strength seems to have drained from my hands,” Suzuran said in an unconvincing voice. She closed the bottle tightly. “I’ll have to ask you to do it after all. And then please do me, as well, if you don’t mind.”

“Hey! I just saw you close the bottle, didn’t I? Why the sudden betrayal?”

Suzuran ignored my protest and laid herself across my other leg. Now they had my legs pinned down, and I couldn’t move!

“Now get to work.”

“Yes, please begin, Sir Namidare.”

Rosalind was on one leg. Suzuran was on the other. The suntan lotion was in my hand. And there was nowhere to run.

▽

Afterwards, we all ate the lunch Tetra and Satsuki had prepared for us. But lucky me was forced to eat something Tsumiki made (a “creative” dish, she called it) and got to explore the boundary between the quick and the dead. Beach edition.

“It’s even more poisonous than last time...” I heard Satsuki lament.

"The parts she helped me make were okay, but…" Tetra said.

"Waaah! I just wanted to try making one dish on my own!" Tsumiki wailed in tears.

After some pretty nasty convulsions, Satsuki and Harissa's healing spells brought me back.

"Ugh… I think I was just looking down on my own body," I said.

"You were pretty close to leaving us forever, huh?"

R wasn't joking. I'd been that close to death.

"…Um, sorry," Tsumiki said, looking down apologetically.

Well, at this point, I was almost used to it. I just laughed and waved my hand dismissively.

"Don't let it bother you. Thankfully, I was the only one who ate any. But next time, don't try and sneak it in like that. The shock wasn't good for my heart."

"I know that. I guess it's too soon for me to start making lunches for you, huh?"

Tsumiki started stuffing the dishes Satsuki and Tetra had made into her mouth. It was like she was trying to eat away her problems.

"This is so good… I'm so jealous…" she said sadly between bites.

By the time we were done eating, everybody was a little bit tired. I didn't feel like going swimming right away, but I wanted to at least get some light exercise, so I decided to take a little stroll down the beach.

The sound of sand crunching beneath my feet. The sound of the waves. The cool, salty breeze. The hot sun. I hadn't had a chance to relax like this for a while. It felt so good that I couldn't help smiling to myself. There was nobody around, and it was nice and quiet…

"Rekka, what are you smirking at? Stop walking out here all by yourself and get back to the girls. Go see if maybe somebody's swimsuit falls off."

Let me take that back. I had my own personal nuisance right there with me.

"I'm not smirking. And why would somebody's swimsuit fall off?"

"Don't tell me you don't know. Girls' swimsuits get blown off by the waves, or they get pulled off when they trip and get caught on a branch. It happens all the time."

"I've heard swimsuits these days don't come off as easy as they used to."

"Would you prefer to see one of them changing then? Let's go accidentally sneak inside the changing room right now."

"How do you accidentally sneak inside something?!"

"Knowing the girls here today, I think half of them would probably forgive you."

"That's imposs…"

That *was* impossible. Right? I mean, really… There was no way…

"Rekka?"

"Yes! I'm sorry!"

"Huh? What are you apologizing for?"

"Oh, it's you, Iris. No, it's nothing."

There was no way I could tell her what I was just thinking about.

"Wh-What's up? Where's everybody else?"

"They're still over by the umbrella."

"Hmm… I see."

"Yeah. Everybody's stopping each other from leaving, so I pretended to go for a swim and followed after you underwater."

"Huh? Why underwater?"

And why was everybody stopping each other from leaving? No, more importantly, Iris had been in the water, which meant that she was soaking wet from head to toe. Her swimsuit was clinging to her skin, making her amazing proportions even more obvious than ever…

"Erotic, huh?"

That's right! But please don't say it! It'll be really bad for me!

"Come on, let's go over there by those rocks!"

"Oh, sure…"

I agreed and let her drag me along just to avoid having to look at her any more than I had to.

The beach was pretty empty to begin with, but there were even fewer people over by the rocks. They blocked off our view of the rest of the beach, and vice versa. Once in a secluded spot, Iris spun around towards me.

"Rekka, are you having fun?"

"Yeah. It feels like I get to enjoy summer ahead of everybody else."

"I see. I'm glad to hear that." Iris smiled and looked relieved.

She was always energetic, so to see her acting a bit more reserved like this was kind of nice.

"I'm so happy you're having fun, Rekka."

"I mean, e-everybody's having fun, right? This place is great."

"Hmph… Don't talk about anyone else right now!"

Iris puffed out her cheeks as she got a little closer to me. When her big silver eyes looked into mine, it suddenly dawned on me that we really were alone. There wasn't anyone else around.

"L-Let's head back."

"Wimp."

Say what you want, R. I don't care.

I started to leave, but Iris grabbed me by the hand.

"…Wait," Iris said in a hushed, weak voice.

I felt like I didn't have a choice but to turn back around.

"...What?" I asked, my voice unintentionally stiff.

"If you don't mind, can you give me... a reward?"

"A reward...?"

"Yeah..."

What was I supposed to do? Iris looked really cute. The contrast between this timid girl and her normal, easygoing self was so stark that I felt like I was really getting to see something special.

Wait, what did she mean by "a reward"?

Iris was staring at me silently, her cheeks slightly red. Both of us froze for a moment, but then Iris started stretched up onto her tiptoes, slowly closing the distance between our faces. They were about to touch...

"...go...!"

Huh?

"Iris, did you just hear something?"

"Huh?" Iris blinked and looked around. "No one else is here."

"But I thought I heard a girl scream just now."

The two of us quietly moved further down towards the rocks and saw a woman arguing with two nasty-looking men.

"A lover's quarrel? No... it doesn't look like it."

"They might be slavers. This is Berano, after all."

I was curious about what Iris said, but I had to focus on what was happening in front of me right now.

"Do you think they have any weapons?"

"I don't think they're carrying anything I can't handle. Even if they are, I can take care of both of them easily at this distance."

"Then I'll distract them. You take them out."

"Okay."

I parted ways with Iris, sneaking around the rocks to get into the water. I swam over to where they were fighting and started to make as much noise as I could in the surf.

"Hey! What are you doing over there?!" I yelled.

All three of them suddenly turned towards me in surprise.

"Hiyaaah!"

When I had their attention, Iris leaped out from behind the rocks and flattened both of the men in an instant.

"Ow! Damn it!"

"We'll get you for this!"

"Sorry, but I don't think that's going to happen." Iris stuck her tongue out at the men as they ran away.

I swam back to shore and regrouped with her. We then both went to see if the woman was safe.

"I thought I saw them grab you by the arm. Are you okay?"

"Y-Yes, I'm all right."

The woman said her name was Marle. The voice I'd heard was probably her shouting, "Let me go!" Anyway, I was just glad she was safe. But then I heard another voice, this time calling out from the sea.

"Marle! What are you doing over there?!"

We turned around to see a young girl with pink hair swimming towards the beach. She must've been a… friend… of hers…?

"I-Iris, am I going crazy? Her bottom half looks like it's a fish."

"Sorta. She's a mermaid.

"A mermaid?"

"Yup. Berano is a merfolk planet."

This was news to me. My mouth had fallen open, and I was too stunned to close it.

Chapter 1: An Invitation to Ryugu Palace

"Rekka, Iris, thank you so much for saving Marle."

The girl bowing deeply to us in gratitude turned out to be none other than the princess of this very planet. In other words, a mermaid princess. She introduced herself as Rain. Marle, the girl we'd saved, was one of her servants. She had normal human legs when I'd saved her, so I couldn't tell, but she was apparently a mermaid, too. They told me that mermaids could change their tails into pairs of legs whenever they wanted.

"Jeez, you just vanished all of a sudden! I was so worried!"

"I'm so sorry, Princess Rain."

"I'm just glad you're all right," Rain said with a smile as she pulled Marle in tight for a hug.

Since all merfolk were beautiful, including the two girls before us, their species was a popular target for slavers. That helped me make sense out of what Iris had said earlier.

"I must thank the two of you properly. Might I invite you and the rest of your party to Ryugu Palace?"

"Huh? Ryugu Palace? Really?!"

Iris seemed to get really excited at hearing that name.

"Yes, of course."

"Hooray! I've always wanted to stay there for a night!"

"Hey, Iris, what's Ryugu Palace?" I asked, feeling a little left out.

"Well, I told you that planet Berano is a resort planet, right? The beautiful beaches are one reason, of course, but the real reason is the resort town under the sea."

"Under the sea?!" I yelled in astonishment and looked towards the water. The waves were softly crashing against the shore, but there was no way for me to see what was below the surface.

"Yeah. On the ocean floor, there's a resort town where pretty merfolk run inns and things. The most famous of them all is Ryugu Palace. The whole town is named after it. They call it Ryugu Palace City."

"Huh..."

So basically Ryugu Place was a luxury hotel at a resort that was staffed with mermaids who would see to our every need… Space really is something.

"The turtlebus to Ryugu Palace will be stopping at the D-1 beach in 30 minutes, so please board it then. We'll go on ahead and get your rooms ready. I'll send a guide to the gate, so feel free to take your time when you get there."

Rain and Marle bowed to me one more time, then disappeared beneath the waves. Iris and I went back to the beach umbrella where we were promptly met with a barrage of questions about where we'd been. It took some time to explain the situation, but then we all took a short warp to beach D-1.

"This is the turtlebus?" whispered Satsuki.

"It's alive, isn't it?" whispered Hibiki in turn.

Just as the girls observed, the turtlebus was literally a giant turtle. We climbed up the stairs attached to its shell and went inside. To our surprise, the inside of the shell was empty except for seats for people to use. There were even windows. And the water on Berano was so clear, I got to see all kinds of beautiful fish I'd never seen before on the way to town.

"Look, Tetra! That red fish is so cute!" squealed Tsumiki in excitement.

"You're right. And that clear one is… a jellyfish?" asked Tetra.

"You don't think it's a sea angel? It's awfully big, though. Wah! That octopus thing's got like 50 arms! Think of all the takoyaki you could make with that thing!"

"If we get one, I'd be willing to find out. That is, as long as your only job is to put the sauce on them."

"…Sometimes you're really harsh, Tetra."

"It's out of love."

Tsumiki and Tetra, the Nozomiya duo, spent most of the trip staring out the window of the turtlebus and chatting away happily. All the other girls were doing the same, except for Rosalind, who looked miserable.

"Ugh… This reminds me of sinking into the sea."

"Mistress, I have some seasickness medication here."

"That won't help!"

Oh, right… Rosalind didn't like the ocean. But she didn't seem to like strong sunlight either, so why'd she want to come to a planet like this anyway? I remembered her saying something about not letting the other girls get the drop on her…

"Poor little Rosalind looks like she's about to cry, doesn't she?" R said. She'd switched back into her usual military outfit. The only time she'd wear a swimsuit, she said, was when everyone else was.

After a bit more time in the turtle, we reached the ocean floor and the entrance to Ryugu Palace City.

"You know, I probably should've asked this before now, but is there oxygen and stuff down here?" I asked.

"Of course. The whole town's in a translucent dome that can withstand the water pressure, and there are machines that produce oxygen, so you can breathe just like you normally would on land. The tourists wouldn't feel safe otherwise," Iris explained.

"I guess that makes sense. But, man, space technology must really be amazing if it can make something like this."

"I guess so. Berano's sovereign planet, Estashion, is a major technological hub like Finerita is. It looks like they offered a lot of training and support to advance Berano's transformation into a resort."

"Huh. Estashion must be a nice place if they're so helpful," I said.

"I dunno if it was all out of the goodness of their hearts." Iris gave me a vague nod, but she had a weird look on her face.

"Actually, Iris, your family's pretty important, right? How come you've never stayed at Ryugu Palace?"

"I asked Daddy if I could a bunch of times, but he always said that we didn't need to stay somewhere so expensive."

"Yeah, I could see him saying that."

"He's pretty set in his ways."

"Yeah, I guess so," I said as I smiled and shrugged.

"Please make sure you haven't forgotten anything. You and your belongings will be scanned at the gate," an announcement reminded us as we got off the bus.

The gate we came to reminded me of a security checkpoint at an airport. The scans were very short, and we only stood outside for a minute or so before a guide from Ryugu Palace came to get us.

"Rekka Namidare, Iris Fineritas Cyphercall, and their party?" she asked.

"Y-Yes."

"Princess Rain has informed me of the situation. Please come this way."

We all followed after the woman. Walking around, I got a good look at the place. Ryugu Palace City was an elegant, pretty town punctuated by canals. And it seemed they weren't just for the merfolk to get around in. There plenty of small gondolas that the merfolk rowed about town for the benefit of the tourists. There were also shops and stalls for tourists, both on land and in the canal.

It was truly a city of water, just like you'd expect from an undersea resort. The whole thing was charming, but at the center of the town was a structure more beautiful and elegant than any of the other buildings.

"This is Ryugu Palace."

"Whooooooooa..."

The longer I craned my neck looking up at it, the longer my gasp of awe became. It was a real palace, not just some themed hotel. It looked like Osaka Castle or Nagoya Castle, but with brighter colors and more extravagant decorations. There was even a moat and a splendid front gate. I could already see why this was considered the best place on the planet to stay. It probably cost hundreds of thousands of yen—if not millions—for a single night here.

"We've been waiting for you, Rekka, Iris." Rain welcomed us at the entrance with a polite bow. "Please come this way."

"Thanks, but are you really sure it's okay for us to be staying in a place like this for free?"

"It's fine. Don't worry about it. Although... I'm afraid there was only one large room available, so you'll all have to stay together."

"Huh?"

"Aww, that's fine."

"It doesn't bother me."

I froze in shock, but Iris and Rosalind didn't seem to mind.

"I'm glad. We'll make sure you have an excellent time here to make up for it." Rain smiled gently, her long skirt swishing back and forth as she climbed the stairs.

Hmm... Well, we're all pretty close now. I guess it's okay. I was the only guy, so as long as I made sure I was careful, it should be fine. In fact, I felt better about it when I saw that the room where we'd be staying was absolutely massive. The floor seemed to be made of wood, but the sensation on the soles of my feet was warm and slightly springy.

"Rekka, please come here and look at this. It's amazing."

"Hm?"

After I set down everyone's things in the corner of the room, I went over to the window to see what Tetra was talking about.

"Wow, that is amazing."

From the window in our room, we could see almost all of Ryugu Palace City.

"This is the third floor, right? It's pretty high up."

"Ryugu Palace is built on higher ground than the surrounding area, and each of the floors has a high ceiling," Rain, who had been listening to our conversation, explained.

"I bet the higher floors have an even better view."

"The top floor, where my mother and I live, lets you see clear from one end of the town to the other," Rain said.

“Rekka, why don’t we go check out the town a little?” Iris suddenly interrupted.

“I want to go, too!” Tetra said eagerly.

“Me, too.”

“Me, too!”

“I’ll give you all a tour, then,” Rain offered.

Everybody had so much energy…

“I shall pass. I’m a little tired. Suzuran, if you want to go, feel free.”

“You’re sure you’re all right?”

“Making you stay by my side won’t make me feel better. I’m just a little under the weather. Don’t worry about me. Just go.”

And so Rosalind stayed behind in the room to rest while Rain took the rest of us on a tour of the city.

▽

“Would you rather walk or take a tour in a gondola?” Rain asked.

“What do you guys think?” I asked, turning to the girls.

“Since we’re here, why not take a gondola tour?” Tsumiki said.

Everyone agreed, so we headed to a shop where you could rent gondolas. Only after we got there did I realize that the gondolas were actually pulled by some kind of fish that looked like a round stingray.

“I will be their guide, so we’ll only need the boat,” Rain explained to the shopkeep.

“Understood, Princess. Please take care.”

The merfolk at the rental shop watched us go as we split up into two separate gondolas and headed off.

“That’s the undersea theater. There’s an aquarium there where you can see underwater plays and dance performances.”

Each time we passed a building, Rain would give us a clear and concise explanation of what it was and what was inside. Ryugu Palace City had all kinds of fascinating events and unusual places to see. It was no wonder both the streets and canals were filled with tourists. The reason the beaches felt so empty must have been because everyone was down here all along.

“This place is amazing. There’s no way you could see it all in a day.”

“If you’d like, Rekka, you’re welcome to stay longer,” Rain said with a sidelong glance in my direction. “I don’t normally get the chance to talk with people my age, like all of you. If it’s possible, I’d love for you to stay so we can chat more.”

Oooh… Now I understood why Taro Urashima didn’t want to leave the Ryugu Palace he visited. It would be really hard to refuse a request from a beautiful girl like this…

That is, if it weren't for the seven pairs of eyes I could feel boring holes into me in cold silence.

"I-I appreciate the offer, but I have to pass. I'm no Taro Urashima, and if I stay any longer, I'm going to get an unexcused absence from school."

Guys, thanks for helping me with my self-control. I appreciate it, but I'd appreciate it more if you didn't look like you were all about to strangle me!

"I see…"

I saw Rain try to hide her disappointed expression with the sleeve of her kimono.

"W-Well, you know…! Planet Berano is a really nice place, though!" I quickly tried to cheer her up. "The sea's beautiful and clean, and there's all kinds of things to do in town. I'd love to come back."

"Really?!"

"Yeah. I want to go to all the places I didn't get a chance to visit today. Once school's out for summer vacation, I'll come back."

"I'll be waiting for you."

I felt a chill run down my spine. Was it just me… or did everybody look about three times madder than they had been before?

Apparently if I tried to make one person happy, I just made someone else angry. What's a guy to do?

"Uh… R-Rain! What's that shop there?"

"That's a gift shop."

"Cool, let's check it out."

I was glad to change the subject, but everyone agreed to the idea. We all got off the gondolas and went into the gift shop. I decided I should pick up something for Rosalind since she was stuck in the hotel room. I didn't have any space money, so I figured I'd have to borrow some from Iris or something.

The souvenirs were a cross between what you'd see at an aquarium and what you'd see in Kyoto. It was your standard line of novelties, but considering we were in space, the designs on everything made me raise an eyebrow. Were these weird creatures even real?

The girls were all clustered around the key chains and stuffed animals. Suzuran in particular was staring at a dolphin-like plushie, completely unmoving. Satsuki was standing a little further away from the others, looking at… Was it a wishing stone? I guess those were popular both in Japan and outer space. There seemed to be all kinds of them, including ones for your well-being and luck in your love life.

"Hm?"

Hibiki, however, had walked away from the group. It looked like she was just wandering around the store.

“Hey, Hibiki,” I called to her, curious what she was up to.

“Rekka? What is it?”

“Nothing, really. I was just wondering if you found anything good.”

“I don’t know about good, but there’s certainly some interesting stuff here.”

“Sure is.” I laughed a little. “But you’re not going to look at the stuffed animals with everyone else?”

“...I’m not really into that stuff. I’d rather get something useful than something that will just sit in my room.” Hibiki chuckled and pulled on her cream-colored short-sleeved shirt a bit. “Clothes, maybe. Lately I’ve been wearing things like this... but I don’t think they really look good on me.”

“I think you look fine. Your swimsuit was cute, too.”

“Wh-What?!” Hibiki suddenly staggered back two or three steps, covered her mouth with one hand, and pointed at me with the other. “Wh-What are you trying to say?!”

“Uh... Did I say something weird?”

I’d just said what I was honestly thinking... Was that a mistake? Oh, wait! That’s right. Hibiki got mad when I was staring at her chest at the beach. Did she take my remark about her swimsuit the wrong way?

“N-No, I didn’t mean it in a dirty way!”

“Now I really have no idea what you’re saying!”

Yeah... That and some other stuff happened, but Iris paid for everybody’s stuff when we all left the store.

“Huh? Where are the gondolas?”

Both of the gondolas we’d left at the edge of the canal were missing.

“Oh! I forgot to tie them up!” Rain gasped. “Normally the guide does that, so...”

“Hmm, I bet those stingray things that were pulling the boats made off with them. Think the rental shop will get mad?”

“I think it’s probably okay. They’re well trained, so they should go back to the store on their own.”

“I see. That’s good, at least.”

“I’m sorry, everyone. I should have been more careful...”

Rain was genuinely apologetic, but nobody really complained. We were still within sight of Ryugu Palace, so all it really meant was that we had to walk back for the rest of our tour. But it wasn’t a bad thing. If anything, there was probably more we could see on foot than from the canal.

“...You know, I guess a lot of aliens aren’t that different from people on Earth. I was expecting something more like octopus people or little green men. I mean, even that King Satamonia guy was kinda humanoid," I said to Iris as I watched the people passing us by.

"It's weird, but you're right. Some people say it's because all life in the universe began in the same place, but nobody—not even scientists—knows the truth."

"Hmm... Couldn't Satsuki use her Magic of Omniscience to find out?"

"Probably, but it would take a really long time."

So she could find out if she wanted to, huh? I hadn't thought about it before, but if Satsuki wanted to, couldn't she win a whole bunch of Nobel Prizes like that? As I was thinking about it, I suddenly heard what sounded like a loud impact in front of me.

"A dine-and-dasher!"

There was a woman shouting as a man in flashy clothing jumped out into the street.

"Hey, he's coming this way!"

Iris noticed first, but the dine-and-dasher was indeed headed in our direction. The street was filled with people, but he was expertly dodging them as he ran. I got in front of the girls and told them all to stand back so they wouldn't get hurt. The man seemed to notice me, and we locked eyes for a moment.

"Kyah!"

"Oops!"

But he must've been too busy staring at me, because he failed to properly avoid a blue-haired girl on the street and was staggered off balance right in front of me. Wait, if he was some petty criminal, I was supposed to catch him, right?!

"Take this!"

LARIAT!

"Gwah!"

My lariat hit him hard, and he went flying back.

Plink!

"Huh?!" ...Gulp.

Something flew right at me, and with my mouth open in surprise, I accidentally swallowed it. Maybe a pebble or something got kicked up in the scuffle?

"Wow, Rekka! That was so cool!"

"Iris! If you pull on my arm that hard, your chest..."

"Right, right. Knock it off, you two."

As Satsuki pulled Iris off me, the woman who was shouting in the street a moment ago came running up to us.

"You caught him for me? Thank you so much!"

She was probably the owner of a shop. She was a mermaid, too, and really pretty. She thanked us and brought the dazed man to his feet.

"You're coming with me. If you don't have money, there's plenty of work to be done, so I sure hope you're ready to get your hands dirty!"

"Oww… Don't get so mad, miss. It's a waste of a pretty face."

"Shut up."

"OWW!"

The man let out a pathetic shriek as the woman twisted his arm and raised it up. He seemed feisty, and we didn't want him trying to run again, so we followed the woman back to her shop nearby.

"Oww… Miss, stop. Please. Please, just stop for a second."

"If I do, you'll just run away again, won't you?"

"No, no. Not with that scary guy right there, I won't. Can you at least let go of one arm?"

The man sounded so desperate that she took pity on him and let go of one of his arms. With his newly freed arm, the man made a flower appear in his hand like magic and handed it to the girl he'd run into a moment ago.

"I'm sorry for running into you, miss. Please take this as an apology."

"U-Um, thank you!"

The girl, who wore glasses and had her blue hair tied into braids, took the flower a little hesitantly.

"Are you hurt? If you are, I'd be happy to nurse you back to—yeoowwwwch!"

"You're going to be too busy washing dishes for me."

The man's pickup attempt came to an abrupt halt when the owner grabbed his arm again.

"Um, I'm not hurt, but I think I dropped my ring…" the girl said. She was forcing a smile, but she clearly seemed upset about it.

"Is the ring important to you?" the store owner asked.

"Yes. I think it slipped off my finger when he bumped into me..."

Wait, don't tell me that ring was...

"Um, I think I might've swallowed it."

"What?!" several people shouted at once.

"Well, something got into my mouth back there. I guess I accidentally swallowed it..."

"Oh, I don't think that's it, then. I saw the ring land on the ground and roll away."

"Then maybe it's under there?" Hibiki said, pointing to what looked like some kind of space-age vending machine.

"I thought so, too, but it was too dark to see anything when I looked..." the girl mumbled.

"Just leave it to me!" Tetra interjected.

"That's right. You can see in the dark, can't you, Tetra?" I asked.

"You bet!"

Tetra got on the ground to take a peek, let us know she'd found it, then slipped her hand underneath the machine.

"Is this it? It looks like some kind of toy," she asked as she pulled it out.

"I'm so glad... This ring's been precious to me ever since I was a little girl. Thank you... Tetra, was it?"

"Yes, that's right."

"I'm Shirley. Shirley Madagascarwel Blood."

Shirley happily took the ring from Tetra and smiled.

▽

Shirley said she was an astrogeneticist and astromechanical engineer who worked on all kinds of things, from genetic modification research to clones, robots, and cyborgs. She'd come to Berano for a vacation. Apparently, she went out for a walk and had gotten a little lost. She was trying to find her way back when that man ran into her. Talk about a bad way to spend your vacation.

"Ryugu Palace City has a lot of canals, so the streets often come to abrupt stops. If you're here on your own instead of with a tour group, I recommend taking a gondola," Rain said.

"Um... I haven't been on a lot of trips, so I'm not used to stuff like that."

"Want to go around with us, then?" I asked.

Shirley looked a little surprised at my offer.

"Can I?"

"Sure, I don't mind. If you run into any more problems like that on your own, it might ruin your whole vacation, right?"

“...All right. I guess I’ll take you up on that.”

And so Shirley joined our Ryugu Palace City tour. Since we were still basically strangers, she stayed behind the group and seemed a little tense at first. But fortunately, this was a resort town. There was a lot for us to do to have fun together. After watching a show of performing fish and trying some of planet Berano’s famous desserts, she opened up and joined in more freely. Tetra in particular seemed to take a liking to her, and they spent a lot of time talking to each other.

“So you’re the chief researcher at your lab, Shirley? That’s amazing.”

“But you’re leading a whole village and helping them grow, right? That seems a lot more amazing to me.”

Maybe they’d bonded over the ring, but Shirley seemed to take a shine to Tetra, too.

“Would you like to head back to Ryugu Palace, everyone?” Rain asked. “It will be dinnertime quite soon.”

“Yeah, I guess we can head back. Shirley, where are you staying?”

“Um, I’m staying at Ryugu Palace, too.”

“Oh, my,” Rain said.

What a coincidence. Wait, if she was staying there, did that mean Shirley was really rich?

“Then why not eat dinner with us?” Tetra volunteered.

Nobody objected. Our room was big enough that adding one more wouldn’t make a difference. We headed straight back to the hotel after talking about it, where we found Rosalind moping around the room still.

“Hahh... Here’s yet another girl.”

“Hey, you don’t need to sigh right in front of her!” I said to Rosalind under my breath.

“You don’t even understand why I’m sighing.”

Huh?

Well, whatever. Even if she looked unhappy, it didn’t seem like Rosalind was opposed to Shirley being there. We ended up inviting Rain, too, and everyone changed into yukata-like outfits before all 11 of us dug into a delicious dinner at Ryugu Palace.

“I didn’t expect there to be sashimi in space.”

“Tsumiki, isn’t this the octopus we saw from the turtlebus?”

Tsumiki and Tetra both worked in a restaurant, so they were curiously discussing each dish as it came out. They even asked Rain about a few of them.

At this rate, I was worried Nozomiya might start serving space food. It was getting further and further away from a normal cafeteria as it was. Their main menu right now was food from the age of gods, for one thing. Well, if it tasted good, maybe that’s all that mattered...

But I hoped that someday I would get to eat something that tasted good there, too.

“Thank you for the meal!”

We all finished our fancy dinner feeling very satisfied and put our hands together to show Rain how grateful we were. Since Rain and Shirley didn’t know anything about Earth manners, they looked a little confused by the gesture.

After dinner was free time. And when you had free time at an inn like this, there was only one thing to do: play games. But...

“Rekka, want to play cards?” Satsuki wanted to play a card game.

“Let’s tell each other’s fortunes!” Tsumiki had a fortune-telling book.

“Do you know how to play chess, Rekka?” Rosalind had a chessboard.

“W-Wait. Guys, I can’t do all of this at once.”

Everybody had something different they wanted to do.

“Oh, my. May I join you?” Rain asked.

“Shirley, you should join us, too,” Tetra said.

“Really? You’d let me?”

With Rain and Shirley joining in, we all had a great time explaining the rules to them and setting up games tournament-style to account for the sheer number of people we had playing.

▽

At about 11:00 P.M., we decided to take a break and each go have a bath.

“Man, my head hurts...”

After all I’d done today, I was pretty wiped out, so I went to go take a load off by the window and enjoy the view.

“Whoa! This chair’s soft!”

The chair I sat down in was designed to look like a mermaid. It looked like it was made out of marble, but it felt like cushy foam.

I opened the window to take in the night air. Looking down, I could see all the artificial lights below in Ryugu Palace City. The town was still bustling at night, but the noise didn’t reach all the way up to Ryugu Palace. As I stood at the window, I realized how calm it was outside.

“I wish there was some wind... Nah, I guess that’s impossible.”

I’d almost forgotten we were inside an undersea dome.

Whoosh...

“Huh?”

There was suddenly a breeze sweeping across my cheek. There was oxygen in the dome, so maybe it was circulating from some kind of climate control system?

"Can I sit here?"

"Oh, hey, Shirley. Sure, make yourself comfortable."

"Thank you," Shirley said as she took the chair opposite mine.

"You taking a break, too, Shirley?"

"Yes. I don't know if I've ever had this much fun in my life."

"That's right. You said you have a full-time job, didn't you? Do you not have time to play?"

"Well, it's not that, but..." Shirley chuckled and looked away. "I said I haven't been on a lot of trips, but this is actually the first one I've ever been on. So I really don't know what you're supposed to do at a resort like this."

"I see."

"It would've been great if I had a friend to come with, but I don't, so... I guess I was really lucky to run into you guys. You've made this so much fun, Rekka."

Shirley was almost a year older than me, but she said she'd been working for a long time. I was still just a student, so I couldn't imagine a work environment like that.

"Work must be really hard, I bet..."

"I suppose. But I don't have any problems with my job, you know? What I'm doing right now is going to make a wonderful world for us."

"Huh?"

"Oh, my," R suddenly said.

Wait, why was R nodding at Shirley with a sympathetic look on her face? Don't tell me... I glanced back at her.

"Yup, you guessed it. Looks like Shirley's a heroine."

Seriously?

I mean, sure, Hibiki told me to watch out for anything that seemed strange, and meeting a girl at a fancy inn was definitely a special event, but... seriously?

"So, what's this wonderful world going to be like?"

"Oh? Well, let me think... It's an ideal world where it's always warm like spring. You can always be with your friends like this, and nobody ever has to hurt each other."

"I see..."

"Yeah, I'm working really hard to make that world a reality."

While I might be able to help with the friends part, a peaceful world of permanent spring sounded more like a fairy tale than any reality I'd ever heard of. Well, I guess if there were planets of endless summer like Berano, we might be able to find a springtime one if we looked hard enough.

Either way, I didn't have the first clue how to go about resolving this story. Could a high school student like me even help her? I guess just the fact that we'd met each other like this meant I probably could. One way or another. In that case…

"So, I guess this is your first step towards an ideal world, huh?" I offered her my hand.

"Um… what?"

"A handshake. Do you not do those in space? You both take each other's hand and shake lightly. It's a sign of trust."

"Trust?"

"Yeah, and maybe friendship, too. We've eaten together, played together, laughed together… We're friends now, right? So I'm the first person to be part of your ideal world. Or, wait… Since you were there already, maybe I'm number two?"

I laughed a little, but Shirley's eyes went wide. She timidly took my hand. I shook it a little and smiled at her.

"Your dream's really huge, but if there's anything I can do to help, just tell me. I'll do anything I can."

"…Thank you, Rekka."

After a moment's astonishment, Shirley pushed up her glasses and smiled.

Anyway, a warm, peaceful world, huh? If I lived there, I might get to relax… No, for some reason, that seemed like it was impossible. And that reason was probably the girl from the future who was floating next to me.

I helplessly chuckled a little, and Shirley looked confused. Wait a minute. Shirley wasn't the only girl we'd met here.

"Does that mean Rain's a heroine, too?" I whispered my suspicions to R.

"No, it looks like Rain isn't a heroine."

"Really?"

I mean, it would be really bad for me if every girl I met turned out to be a heroine, but…

Suddenly, something flew into the room from the open window.

"Coo, coo coo!"

"…A turtle?"

It looked like a flying turtle. Was it some kind of space turtle? The noises it was making were surprisingly cute.

"T… Tu…"

"Huh? Shirley?"

"NOOO! A TURTLE!" Shirley screamed and took a small gun out of her pocket.

It was shaped like a smaller version of the medical gun I'd used to defeat Bahamut. Before I could ask any questions, Shirley was pressing the barrel—the needle—right up against the head of the turtle that had landed on the floor.

"Coo?"

Fwoosh!

She pulled the trigger, and the contents of the syringe instantly emptied into the turtle.

"Coo…"

The turtle suddenly froze like it had turned into a statue.

"Sh-Shirley?! What are you doing?!"

"Uwaaaaah! No! No turtles! Anything but turtles!"

Shirley then ran to the corner and curled up into a ball. She was in tears and mumbling to herself.

"Oh, my! Mr. Turtle froze!" Rain heard the noise and was shocked to see the frozen turtle.

I eventually calmed Shirley down enough to find out that she'd fired something called a "Time Stop," which shut down a living creature at the cellular level. I managed to get the antidote for the Time Stop from her, then used it to get the turtle moving again so I could let him back outside.

"It's okay now, Shirley."

"Th-Thank you…" she whimpered, her eyes still full of tears.

"Now, let's forget about this unpleasantness and play a game! Break time's over, you two!" Iris insisted.

She pushed us back into the center of the room, and the games began once more.

▽

Before long, it was past midnight. We were all tired enough by then that we finally decided to call it a night, but…

"…How did this happen?"

At the moment, I was sleeping in my futon in a room with ten times as many girls as boys… No, actually, there was no sleeping involved. I CAN'T SLEEP LIKE THAT!

At first I planned on sleeping in the hallway, but Rain politely explained that that wasn't an option. Yeah, I guess you couldn't exactly do something like that in a high-class inn.

And so, I reluctantly got into bed, surrounded by ten girls after we added Rain and Shirley, but let me say it again: THERE WAS NO WAY I COULD SLEEP LIKE THAT!

"So, Rekka, who are you going to jump in bed with?"

"Nobody! What are you talking about, R?"

"Oh, I thought that's why you were still awake. Anyway, that fight to decide who got to sleep next to you was just brutal, wasn't it?"

"…I don't even want to think about it."

Even this dumb conversation with R felt like a blessing when time seemed to be passing so slowly. It must've been two or three hours after we'd turned out the lights, and I was still wide awake. Just when I was wondering when dawn was going to come in this undersea world…

Rustle rustle.

S-Somebody crawled into my bed?!

"Wh-Who's there?!"

I didn't want to yell this late at night, so I tried to say it as quietly as possible in my surprise as I lifted the covers.

"I-Iris?!"

Staring back at me was a twin-tailed girl I knew well.

"Stay still…"

I was too surprised to move anyway! But what on earth was going on here?! I mean, R had just said something about jumping into bed with someone…

No, no, no! Wait! Why would Iris want to come be in the bed with me? I had no idea how to react, and it only got worse when she started to pat down my body.

"I-Iris, wait…"

At this rate, she was going to touch me in a place that I really shouldn't be talking about! Just when my confusion reached its peak…

"What the heck are you two doing?!" Satsuki screamed as a blast of wind knocked Iris and the futon to the corner of the room.

Then the lights came on, and I could see exactly how mad Satsuki was. It was scary.

"Rekka, what are you doing with Iris?"

"Nothing! I did nothing! Iris suddenly crawled inside my futon…!"

"I see… She tried to get ahead of everybody else, did she? Heheheh…"

No, never mind. It wasn't scary. My childhood friend's smile was absolutely terrifying.

"W-Wait, is Iris okay? You knocked her back pretty hard…"

"Don't worry. For the first blow, I held back. I might not for the second, though."

"Please do! Iris isn't made of steel—"

As I tried to calm Satsuki down, somebody crawled out of one of the other futons.

"What's going on here? What did I do wrong?"

"…Iris?!"

It was the girl who'd caused all this fuss.

"Huh? What?"

She was asleep? But Satsuki had just blown her clean across the room… And wait, hadn't Iris let down her hair before she'd gone to bed? Did that mean that the girl inside my futon… was an imposter?!

Both Iris and I gasped as we looked towards the corner of the room where the fake Iris (?) should have been, but she wasn't there.

"What's going on? You're making an awful lot of noise."

"Sir Namidare? Is something wrong?"

Rosalind and Suzuran were both awake now, as well. Hibiki, Harissa, Tsumiki, Rain, and Shirley all were shortly after, too.

"...Hm?"

Tetra was the only one unaccounted for, and when I looked over to her futon, it seemed like the lump underneath it was twice the size it should have been.

"Satsuki..."

"Yeah..."

We both nodded at each other and tore the covers off the futon together. When we did...

"Ugh... It's bright."

"Ugh... It's bright."

There were two Tetras inside.

"Huh? Why are there two Tetras?"

"Huh? Why are there two Tetras?"

The two Tetras looked at each other in shock as they mimicked each other word for word.

"What's going on here...?" I was stunned myself.

"Well, the obvious assumption is that one of them is a fake," R said rather nonchalantly.

"One of them's a fake, huh? But which one..."

"Rekka, I'm the real Tetra!"

"No, I'm the real Tetra!"

They looked and sounded exactly the same.

"Tsumiki, can you tell which of them is real?"

"Huh? Don't ask me!"

So even Tsumiki didn't know, huh? Hmm... What made Tetra unique? I closed my eyes, pretending to think.

"Hey, Satsuki, can you turn off the lights?" I said after a moment.

"Sure."

When I could tell through my closed eyes that the lights were off, I opened them again. Of course, it was dark now, but I could see two glowing orbs in that darkness.

"So you're the fake!"

"Huh?"

I'd closed my eyes to accustom myself to the darkness beforehand. Thanks to that, I was able to quickly leap towards the fake Tetra—the one whose eyes weren't shining—and grabbed her.

Slam!

"Gyah!"

I'd grabbed her so hard that she fell down and hit her head on the floor, knocking the disguise "she" was wearing right off.

"You... You're the dine-and-dasher we caught this afternoon!" I gasped, staring down at the man now underneath me.

"Oww... Would you get off me? I'm not a huge fan of being held so closely by a man."

"Neither am I!"

Whatever...

"So... Raul, was it? What are you doing in my room?"

"I went to the bathroom and just happened to walk into the wrong room on my way back," the dine-and-dasher—Raul, apparently—said without batting an eye.

"Liar. If you just got the room wrong, you wouldn't have had to do... *that.*"

Gyaaah! I just remembered how it felt when he patted my body down! Ugh... I feel sick.

"He's probably a thief. There's no way some dine-and-dasher could afford to stay at a fancy place like this," Satsuki said.

Great. So he's a dine-and-dasher *and* a thief. Talk about a scoundrel.

"Oh, no, missy. I don't want you getting the wrong idea about me. I am the Great Phantom Thief Raul the Baron. I would never stoop to stealing pocket change from a bunch of kids."

"Great Phantom Thief?" That was quite a title he'd given himself.

"The Great Phantom Thief Baron? No way..."

"Hm? You've heard of him, Iris?"

"Yeah. About 500 years ago, he was a legendary thief who hit places all across the galaxy. Or something like that."

"That's right, little lady. Yours truly," Raul said with a smile.

That sounded... extremely implausible.

"Right. Sure. So, you're some great phantom thief, huh? I suppose that explains how you managed to pull off a Tetra disguise."

"That's right. I can change the size and structure of my skeleton as well as alter my appearance, so I'm a master of disguise."

"Wow, that's amazing."

Tetra seemed rather impressed, which was a little lost on me. Raul wasn't showing the slightest sign of remorse for what he'd done.

"So, what do we do with this man?" Rosalind finally asked.

"Well, he didn't actually take anything, so we can just hand him over to the hotel staff and have them handle it, I guess," I said with a shrug.

"Then I'll lead you to the annex. At this hour, the staff should all be in their rooms," Rain volunteered.

I took her up on the offer and followed her to the door.

"I see. Then Suzuran and I shall accompany you. We don't want him trying to escape," Rosalind said.

"Leave it to us," Suzuran added.

And so the four of us got changed and dragged Raul to the annex. It was a three-story building. The first floor was filled with storerooms while the second and third floors were quarters for the staff. They were each connected with a walkway to the main building where the customers stayed. Since we were staying on the third floor, we didn't have to go down any stairs, so getting there would be easy, even if it wasn't quiet...

"So... Rekka, was it? Man, I tell you... That Suzuran girl and that Rosalind lady are really something. You're just surrounded by all kinds of lovely women. I'm so jealous!"

"..."

"So, which of the girls do you really have your sights set on? Satsuki, your childhood friend? Or Hibiki, the tomboy? Or do you go for the well-endowed type? In that case, you must like..."

"Show some decency!"

Raul hadn't stopped talking since we'd left the room, and just listening to him was exhausting. Not to mention if anybody here was into big breasts, it wasn't me! It was the girl floating next to me!

"Sheesh. I'm glad he's not trying to escape, but I didn't expect him to be so obnoxious."

"If you want to entertain a girl, you need to be cheerful and conversational with a bright smile. So, Rosalind, if you're not seeing anyone now, why not date me? We can get married in a few years. How's that sound?"

"Unfortunately, you're not my type."

"What a shame!" Raul said, trying his best to look genuinely shocked.

"By the way, is there anything you like, Suzuran?"

"I like to watch bugs and flowers. Why?"

"Okay, I'll get you a bouquet of rare flowers, so let's go on a date."

But instead of giving up, he just switched targets to Suzuran. I didn't even know what to say about this guy...

"Rekka, you should take a lesson from him," R whispered in my ear.

No, I mean, I'll admit I was kind of impressed, but there was no way I was gonna take a page out of this guy's book!

"Rain, are we at the annex yet?"

"We're almost there. Once we cross this walkway..."

Rain was walking ahead of us, so she looked back over her shoulder to answer me, but when she did, she stopped dead in her tracks and stared towards the front gate of Ryugu Palace like she was frozen. There were rails on the walkway, but no walls, so we could see the gate clearly.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's just that the town seems a little busier than usual..."

And then suddenly—

BOOM!

—the gate burst into tiny pieces.

"Wh-What...?!"

What just happened?!

As we all stood there in shock, a group of dangerous-looking toughs ran through the broken gate and flooded onto the palace grounds. Among them was a man much, much bigger than the others. He was wearing a mask over his face, so I couldn't read his expression, but the others seemed to be following his orders. So that was their boss, huh?

"Who are those guys?"

"Those are the Seageists. They're pirates."

Surprisingly enough, it was Raul who answered my question.

"Pirates?"

"Space pirates, to be exact. Look at their limbs. See how the light reflects off them? They've all had cyborg implants to load themselves up with weapons. That's how you can tell they're Seageists."

When Raul finished his explanation, he jumped up on the railing and put his hand on the edge of the roof covering it.

"...Wait, where are you going?"

"I just remembered there's somewhere I have to be. Oh, wait."

He pulled a gun with some kind of special design on it out of his breast pocket and tossed it to me.

"This is a stungun. All it does is temporarily paralyze your target, so even a beginner shouldn't have too much to worry about when shooting it. Use it to protect yourself. And with that, farewell!"

"Hey, wait!"

Before I could say another word, Raul flipped up onto the roof and vanished. I would have been concerned, but with everything else going on, I didn't have time to waste on him. More and more pirates were rushing into the palace by the second.

"Rekka, what do we do?" Rosalind asked.

"Let's head back to our room for now. Does that work for you, Rain?"

"Y-Yes!"

Rain looked really nervous, so we took her with us as we quickly headed back the way we came. But when we got back to the main building...

"Wait!" I called to the girls as I raised my hand to get them to stop.

“What is it, Rekka?”

“The pirates are here already.”

I’d tried to act as fast as I could, but the pirates had already reached the third floor. We had to go past a stairwell to get back to our room, but there were five ruffians standing there keeping watch as more of them climbed the stairs up to the fourth floor.

“They’re going up?” Rain gasped. “My mother is up there!”

Oh, crap. That’s right. She’d mentioned earlier that she and her mother lived on the top floor. Unless we were going to be extremely optimistic, it was pretty clear her mother would be in danger.

“Rosalind, Suzuran, can you take out those guards?”

“Hmph. I could do it on my own. Easily, mind you,” Rosalind replied.

“Glad to hear it. Okay then, Suzuran, can you get back to the room on your own?”

“Not a problem.”

Suzuran lifted the hem of her yukata and revealed a belt strapped with silver knives. Old habits die hard, I guess. But don’t get me wrong. I wasn’t complaining right now.

“Got it. Then let’s split into two groups.”

I told Suzuran to get back to the room and have Harissa turn everyone invisible until the pirates were gone. Rosalind, Rain, and I were going to head to the top floor and rescue the queen.

“All right, let’s go.”

At my signal, Rosalind and Suzuran started to run. I readied the stungun that Raul had given me and had Rain, who couldn’t fight, stand behind me.

The pirates noticed us, but Rosalind was faster than they were.

“Too slow!” she cried in a battle roar.

In the instant it took for the pirates to transform their cyber-arms into guns and blades, she was on already on top of them. The first man got his legs knocked out from under him, and the second was sent flying across the hall with a punch to the chest. The third managed to raise his blade-arm, but he took one of Suzuran’s silver knives to the shoulder. Rosalind gave him a swift front kick, and he took out a fourth man as he was knocked backwards.

“I hope Raul was telling the truth and this just stuns you!”

The fifth pirate was practically in a daze at what had just happened. I saw my chance, aimed the stungun, and pulled the trigger. There was a “bzzt” sound as a blast of something like lightning flew out of the barrel and struck him. He began to spasm before falling to the floor. Well… It sure didn’t kill him, but that was pretty brutal.

“Okay, Suzuran! Go take care of the other girls!”

“Understood.”

We parted ways with Suzuran and headed up the stairs. The fourth floor was guarded, as well, but Rosalind didn’t have any trouble taking care of that for us.

“Wait, is this the top floor?”

“No. The stairs to the fifth floor are on the other side of this floor in a place where the guests can’t get to them.”

That made sense. I mean, it was where the queen and her daughter lived. Normal customers wouldn’t be allowed there, so it’s not like there would be stairs going straight to it.

Rain led us down the hall, and Rosalind took out pirate after pirate as we went, but we didn’t seem to be getting any closer to the stairs.

“There are just so many pirates... Wait, doesn’t Berano have police force or an army or something?”

“We have our own police, but they’re mostly for handling disputes and petty crimes in town. We’d have to ask Estashion for help with something serious like pirates...”

That’s right. Iris had said they were under Estashion’s protection.

“How long will it take for help from Estashion to get here?”

“I’m sure our police have already sent out an SOS, so it should be less than an hour.”

There was no way of knowing exactly when the distress signal was sent, but a good amount of time should have passed between when the pirates first arrived at the undersea dome and when they’d hit Ryugu Palace. That meant we had to hold out for another... 30 minutes? Forty, maybe? If we could get to the queen and hide her somewhere until they arrived, would we be safe?

“The door!” Rain screamed as we ran.

I looked down the hallway to see a heavy door—so heavy it seemed drastically out of place with the rest of the palace interior—that had been shattered. It was probably an end-of-the-line security measure to protect the royal family, but there was barely anything left of it. It had been completely destroyed. A cold chill ran down my spine at the sight.

“Let’s hurry!”

We ran up the stairs to the fifth floor and came up on the north side of the building. It seemed to be where Rain and her mother lived, but there wasn’t a soul in sight.

“She’s not here? Is there somewhere else she could be?”

“There’s a room in the southern wing that holds the Mermaid Princess’s Tear.”

“What’s that? Some kind of merfolk treasure?” Rosalind asked

Rain with a raised eyebrow.

"We can get into that later! Let's go!"

There was no time to waste. I hurried them both along as we traversed the fifth floor, but I couldn't shake the chills I was getting. If the Mermaid Princess's Tear really was some important merfolk treasure, the queen might be trying to protect it. And if she was, then...

"Mother!"

Rain's scream was loud enough to shake my eardrums. It turns out my guess was right.

Entering the room, we were confronted by the sight of the huge man in the mask, the guy I figured was the leader. With him, he had a woman in a suit that looked like a secretary of some kind and a young girl with a headband that didn't appear to be of any particular importance. But we weren't looking at them. Rain's mother was there, too, lying on the ground covered in blood.

"Ah... aaah..."

Rain collapsed when she saw what had happened to her mother.

The huge man, whose presence was even more looming this close up, turned towards us with a giant blade in his right hand. In his left was a beautiful, pearl-like jewel that shone with the colors of the sea. I figured that was probably the Mermaid Princess's Tear. Was he here to try and steal it? Was that why he'd done... that?!

"Damn it...!"

My legs were shaking. It was the first time I'd seen someone die. I hadn't made it in time...

"Rekka, get a hold of yourself."

"Y-Yeah..."

Rosalind brought me back to my senses. I choked down the urge to vomit and put my finger on the trigger of the stungun. If I couldn't save her mother, I had to at least try and protect Rain.

"What are these kids doing here?" the girl with the headband asked in disgust.

She was calling us "kids," but she was clearly younger than we were.

"Just go sit in the corner and stay put. That way we won't have to hurt you."

She gestured as if to shoo us away like we were just some annoyance to her.

"Hah! Listen to you, little girl," Rosalind growled. "Do you have any idea how many of your pirate friends I've left lying broken on the floor on my way here?"

"What?"

The girl frowned in confusion just as Rosalind leaped forward.

"Rosalind!" I called after her.

"If we can take out their boss here, we win, right?"

Maybe so, but that doesn't mean we should attack them! The important part is keeping Rain safe!

"Rain, stay close to me!"

I raised the stungun and ran after Rosalind. I had to back her up, but I couldn't move too far ahead or else I wouldn't be able to protect Rain. I just had to try to stay at a safe distance and wait for my chance to help.

"I ain't letting you touch the boss!"

"Out of my way!"

"Ngyaah!"

The girl with the headband defiantly tried to block Rosalind's path, but Rosalind easily pushed her aside and kept heading for the big guy. She lunged at him, but the man blocked Rosalind's attack with the flat of his blade.

"Hmph. You're better than your men, at least."

He stared at Rosalind in silence, then swung his blade to the side. Rosalind evaded by jumping backwards and putting some distance between them. Still silent, the big guy handed the Mermaid Princess's Tear to his secretary and came at Rosalind again.

"Boss, she's just a kid!" the girl yelled in surprise from the floor.

She seemed shocked that the man had attacked Rosalind, but I wasn't quite sure why. Rosalind's kick must have hit her hard. It looked like she still couldn't stand. The secretary in the suit didn't participate in the battle, but rather stood on the sidelines away from the large man. Like him, she was silent the entire time. Compared to the emotional young girl, her expression was cold and indifferent. It was a little creepy.

But I got distracted from that when the man's left arm began to change shape. Wait, was that... a cannon?

"Rekka! Get down!"

Yikes!

I grabbed Rain and got as far out of the path of the cannon as I could. There was a flash of light, and a burst of plasma far larger than the one from my borrowed stungun destroyed a huge chunk of the palace. It was powerful enough that it reminded me of the time that I'd fought the ultimate mage.

"Man, that's really not what I wanted to be thinking about right now..."

Since that was a magic duel, I'd been able to use the anti-magic powers of the Hero's Sword to win, but this was clearly the power of science. I couldn't think of a way to overcome it. But I had to do something. And fast. I needed to end this before he fired again!

"If I can hit him with this and stun him…"

I glanced at the stungun in my hands. The hulking man looked like he'd fashioned his whole body with cyborg parts, including boosters on his back and heels that let him accelerate instantly. Not only was he agile, he was also fast enough to keep up with a vampire like Rosalind. And me? I didn't even know how to aim a gun while running. One miss, and I'd be his next target.

I either had to wait for him to stop moving or fire practically point blank to make sure I wouldn't miss, and there certainly didn't seem to be any way to get close without him noticing. If only I had Harissa's invisibility magic… No, wait. Of course. There was another way to make sure he couldn't see me!

I checked to see where his two allies were. The girl was still on the floor, and the secretary was on the other side of the room. Rain wouldn't be in danger if I disappeared for a second.

"Rain, stay here for a minute!"

"Rekka!"

I made a break for it while holding the stungun tightly in my hands. I ran past the girl on the ground, heading for the giant man as he fought with Rosalind. Rosalind noticed me getting close.

"Rosalind! Turn into bats!"

"Right!"

Thankfully, she seemed to realize exactly what I was trying to do. She instantly transformed into countless red bats and swarmed the big guy to blind him.

He had no reaction other than to raise his blade. He took out several of the bats, but they quickly regenerated and formed a red wall around him. While he was occupied and couldn't see anything else, I moved around behind him.

"His back!" I shouted.

An opening appeared in the red wall of bats, exposing the man's back. I jammed the stungun right up against it and fired. The man moaned in pain, and the bats reformed into the shape of Rosalind.

"This is the end!"

Rosalind brought down her right hand in a chop to finish him off from above.

"Guhh…"

But he just barely managed to move out of the way. How was he still conscious after the blast from the stungun? He must've been even tougher than I thought.

"Hmph. A tough one, aren't you?"

"Hey, Rosalind, are you okay?"

"I'm not even scratched. More importantly, that was great work there, Rekka. You and I really are quite a team." Rosalind smiled happily.

Well, I’m just glad I managed to do something useful.

Bzzt! Bzzt! Snap!

We watched as the man’s mask split in two. I guess Rosalind’s attack had hit him after all.

“Well, would you look at that... Talk about an ugly mug.”

“An ugly mug?”

“See for yourself.”

That’s really mean, Rosalind. I mean, sure, he does look like some kind of fish-man, but you don’t have to be so harsh. If we were being generous, I guess you could say he looks kind of gallant...

“...Are you a merman?”

Huh?

I turned around and saw Rain gasping at the sight of the man’s face.

“Rain, do you know him?”

“...No.”

Rain denied it, but I could tell she was shaking. She was definitely hiding something.

“Rekka, what do we do with him?”

“Hmm... One more blast from the stungun should knock him out.”

That would be enough to keep him from hurting us. Not that I had any plans past that. I turned the gun on him, deciding to shoot first and think later, but...

“I won’t let you!”

The girl with the headband suddenly grabbed me from behind.

“Waah!”

“Grr! Don’t you dare grab Rekka like that!”

Rosalind was mad about something, but I wasn’t quite sure what. Either way, the girl refused to let go.

“I won’t let you hurt the boss!”

Her legs were still trembling and weak, but she seemed to have cyborg augmentations in her arms. They were incredibly powerful. I didn’t think I could shake her off.

“Uh-oh...”

Apparently the big guy had come to his senses at some point, because when I looked up, I saw him silently standing over my shoulder with his blade raised in the air.

Man, I really let my guard down! I thought he couldn’t move anymore! But nope, there he was! Right about to cut me in half! I really needed to get out of the way!

My mind was racing a million miles a minute, but my body reacted much slower than that. Just as the huge blade was about to meet my face...

“Boss! What are you doing?!”

The girl who I thought was my enemy turned her own right arm into a blade and blocked his attack. Of course, it was a far more powerful attack than a young girl standing on two trembling legs could handle. She and I both went flying back through some Japanese-style paper sliding doors and slammed against a railing.

“Ow! Hey, are you okay?”

“Ugh…”

The girl, who’d been caught between me and the railing and had taken most of the blow, just moaned.

Creeeeeaaak…

But more alarming than that was the sound I heard coming from behind her.

Snap!

The railing gave way, and both of us lost the only thing that was holding us up. If it was just me, I might’ve been able to grab on to what was left of the railing, but…

“Damn it!”

That didn’t matter. I put my feet against the wall as we fell and pushed off of it as I reached out for the girl. I was able to grab her, but with nothing to catch us, we both fell five stories to the ground.

Intermission

"Rekka!"

When Rekka fell from the top floor of Ryugu Palace, Rosalind transformed into bats and followed after him as quickly as she could. To her, it was the obvious thing to do, but it put Rain in the worst position imaginable.

"Ah… uh…"

The mermaid princess was seized with terror, unable to do anything but tremble. She thought she was about to be killed. She thought all of the merfolk were about to be killed. The man in front of her had the motive to do it.

But after he was rid of Rekka, the man just stood there, motionless and silent. It was as if he didn't even see Rain.

I-I have to get away…

She knew she needed to run, but her feet wouldn't move. Fear had taken control of her legs.

The secretary, who until now had silently been watching things unfold, walked over to the giant man and whispered something to him. He slowly nodded and turned towards Rain.

"Aah…"

Rain was almost in tears as she felt the oppressive weight of his gaze upon her. She turned to the body of her murdered mother.

Mother…

But alas, the corpse that was no longer her mother offered her no comfort.

The man silently approached.

The sorrow of losing her mother and the fear that she was about to share the same fate washed over Rain at the same time. She could no longer hold it in and began to sob.

"Waah…"

The man's huge hands reached out towards her.

▽

Ryugu Palace, second floor. Girls' bathroom.

Tetra and Shirley were hiding in a stall.

"A-Are the scary people gone?"

"I don't know, but we can't leave yet."

"I'm sorry… This is my fault for saying I wanted to go to the bathroom."

"No, I wanted to go, too… We were just unlucky that the third floor bathroom was being cleaned, you know?"

When Rekka left to hand Raul over to the staff, the two girls also stepped out to visit the bathroom. That was where they were when the pirates had rushed the palace, leaving them unable to get back to the others.

What do I do? What do I do?

Out of all the girls, Tetra was the weakest in combat. After all the time she'd spent living underground, she was weak in general. If even a single pirate found them, there would be nothing she could do. And Shirley was a scientist, so the same was probably true of her.

The two girls huddled in silence after that, but even without saying a word, they could each feel the other shaking as they held each other close.

"I-It's okay," Tetra finally said, trying to make them both feel a little better. "Rekka will come to save us. I know it. So until he does, let's just stay here so the scary people can't find us."

"Y-Yeah."

But as if her prayer had been heard and cruelly denied, the door to the bathroom opened with a click. Tetra's eyes opened wide at the sound. She tried her best to keep herself under control, even putting her hand over her mouth to keep from screaming. She looked and saw that Shirley was doing the same thing. Both girls waited in anxious horror as the footsteps echoed ominously through the cramped room.

Please… Just go away…

But the footsteps suddenly stopped. They stopped right in front of the stall where the two frightened girls were hiding.

SNAP!

The door to the stall was split in two. The top half slid off its hinges and fell to the ground, revealing a towering man looking down at them.

"Rekka…"

Tetra's tearful plea fell on deaf ears.

Chapter 2: The Pirate Planet

My head feels like it's full of fuzz. What happened?

"Ugh..."

"Rekka, are you awake?"

"Rosalind? Aagh... I can't even remember how many times I've passed out like this."

It wasn't something I tried to keep track of. It would just be a reminder of how many times I'd almost gotten myself killed.

Either way, I came to in a cramped tunnel of some kind. I squinted and saw we were just inside the entrance of a big pipe... maybe to one of the canals? To my left, I could see the water running down the pipe deeper into darkness, and to my right, I could see lights from the moats of Ryugu Palace.

"Where are we?"

"Probably the pipe that circulates water in and out of the moat."

"What happened to Rain and the big guy?"

"I don't know."

"...I see."

I sat up. I must've hit the water when I landed. My whole body hurt, and I was soaking wet. Rosalind said she'd left Rain behind... But she'd done it to save me, so I couldn't really blame her for that.

"Hey, where's that pirate girl? She fell down with us, right?"

"She's right there."

Rosalind's pale finger pointed to the girl with the headband, who was currently sitting with her legs crossed.

"Um, are you hurt?" I asked.

"...Hmph."

She turned away. She didn't seem to like me much.

"She's not hurt, I don't think. You shielded her from the fall. However..." Rosalind frowned and ripped the headband off the girl's head. "She's being quite a brat considering you saved her... Hmm?"

"G-Give that back!"

The girl reached out to try and take her headband back from Rosalind, but without it, there was a tiny horn visible on her head.

"Are you an oni or something?"

"An oni? What the heck is that? Just give me that back!"

"Hmph. If you were a fellow outsider like me, I was willing to show you some sympathy... But if you're not, I suppose there's no need to give this back."

Rosalind pushed the girl away and sighed. I felt a little bad, so I spoke up.

"Rosalind, give it back to her."

"Hmm... I will if she's willing to answer some questions. Girl, what's your name?"

"...Fam," she answered unhappily.

"Fam, is it? And you're with these Seageists? What are you pirates doing on this planet?"

"The same thing pirates always do," Fam said bluntly.

"Of course... But some of what you're doing doesn't make sense. If you're after money, why not rob the guests at the inn?"

"Now that you mention it, that's a good question," I said.

Ryugu Palace was the priciest inn on Berano. Most of its guests were probably rich, so if the pirates were just after money, they'd be easy targets. But as far as I could tell, the pirates were leaving the patrons alone. So they must have been after...

"You're after that jewel called the Mermaid Princess's Tear, aren't you? It just looked like an ordinary gem when I saw it. Why is it so valuable?"

"It's supposed to be some kind of ancient merfolk treasure," a new voice suddenly answered.

I turned around and saw someone I recognized coming from deeper within the pipe.

"Raul!"

"Hey, kid," Raul answered with a grin.

"You show up in the strangest places, don't you?" Rosalind said in an exasperated whisper.

"So you know about this Mermaid Princess's Tear?"

"Hmm... I suppose the answer is both yes and no, depending on how you see it."

"That tells me nothing. What do you mean?"

Raul shrugged. "Like I said, it's supposedly some ancient merfolk treasure. When you're in my line of work, you hear about things like that. The rumors say it's hidden in Ryugu Palace, but not a single person's ever seen it. The most common version of the story says that it's an incredibly valuable jewel."

"The treasure of the merfolk, huh?"

The Mermaid Princess's Tear(?) that the big man had been holding definitely looked like a jewel, and I could definitely see pirates going after something like that... probably. The only catch was that if they were after treasure—money, really—then why not attack the guests while they were at it?

"That doesn't make sense," Rosalind said. "The Mermaid Princess's Tear must have some other secret."

It seemed like we were on the same page about that.

"...Oww!"

Huh? Suddenly my head started hurting.

"What's wrong, Rekka—gah!"

"Oww... What is this?"

Rosalind and Raul both began to clutch their foreheads in pain, too.

"Aah! You! Tiny girl! Give me back my headband!" Fam started to shout when she saw us in pain.

"Hm? Hey, don't tell me that kid's a gremlin..."

"A gremlin?"

"What's that?"

Neither me or Rosalind had any idea what Raul was talking about.

"Just give her back the headband. It's her horn that's causing these headaches."

"Hmph."

Rosalind scoffed and forced the headband back on Fam's head. Fam adjusted it so it covered the horn, and my headache stopped instantly.

"The pain's gone... Raul, what the heck was that? And what's a gremlin?"

"A rare species that gives off special electromagnetic waves from its horn. They can screw up delicate machinery or interfere with the brain's electrical signals, which causes headaches. It's not something gremlins can control, though. That's just how they are, so cut her some slack."

Raul put his hand on Fam's head, but she slapped it away and told him not to touch her.

"Wait, did you call me 'tiny girl' a minute ago?" Rosalind asked.

"You are tiny," Fam said.

"I'm the same size as you are!"

The two tiny girls proceeded to shout at each other.

"Guys, now's not the time for... Wait. Raul, did you cut your hand?"

"Oh?"

Blood was dripping from a long cut across Raul's hand where Fam had slapped it.

"It's fine. It's not deep... Look."

Raul rubbed his palms together to wipe the blood away, then spread them out to show that the wound had totally disappeared.

"Huh? You're right..."

It sure looked like it was a lot of blood, but there was no sign of it now. The cut really was gone. As I tried to figure out what had happened, Fam began to kick her legs and stomp her feet.

"Let me go already!" she yelled.

"Nwah!"

Spit flew from her mouth and landed on Rosalind. I could see Rosalind's temples begin to twitch.

"You really are a little brat. Everybody knows that when you catch a pirate, they go straight to the noose."

"...!"

Fam's expression froze up when she heard the word "noose," but only for a second. The next moment, she was glaring at us. Maybe she was just bluffing, but she was pretty strong-willed.

"Come on, Rosalind. Don't scare her."

"I wasn't kidding... Oh?"

"Hm?"

Rosalind looked up out of the pipe towards the front gate of Ryugu Palace.

"The pirates are starting to withdraw..." I said.

"They've got what they're after, so they probably want to get out of here before the army arrives."

"No! Boss!" Fam screamed.

"Looks like you've been left behind," Rosalind said with a grin.

For the first time, the pirate girl went pale.

When I looked out of the pipe again, I saw her "boss" come out of the palace. What was that he was carrying over his shoulders?

"Rain! Tetra! And Shirley? How?! They were supposed to be hiding in the room!"

The three girls were all motionless.

"Damn it! He can't..."

"Calm down, Rekka. No pirate takes dead bodies back with them. They're just unconscious."

"But then why take them?!"

"He either wants hostages in case someone comes after him, or he wants to sell them to slavers. Either way, it's nothing good."

"The boss would never do that!" Fam yelled.

She was pretty insistent, but we had no way of knowing if it was the truth or not.

"Hmm... Seems you've just been caught up in Rain's story. Looks like the kidnapped princess type."

I know that, R! You don't have to tell me!

No, even if Rain wasn't a heroine, it was still my job to save her. And of course Tetra and Shirley, too!

"I want to get them back. Rosalind, will you help me once more?"

"Hmph... Well, I should've guessed that you would ask that."

I figured I could take that as a yes.

"So, what's the plan? Attack head-on and get them back?"

“No. If they use Tetra and the others as hostages, we’ll be in danger, and so will they. We’ll follow them and wait for our chance.”

Raul interrupted us before we could get any further with our plan.

“Don’t tell me you’re thinking of sneaking aboard the Seageists’ pirate ship. That’s insane.”

“Are they that dangerous?”

“They sure are. They used to raid Galactic Federation merchant ships all the time. They’re a real nasty bunch.”

Fam frowned. Even if they were pirates, she clearly didn’t like someone talking about her friends that way.

“For the last year or so, they’ve even been raiding military supply ships. They hired some kind of amazing cybernetic engineer to upgrade all their weapons, I heard. The federation sent a task force after them and ended up taking heavy losses, which means they’re no normal pirates. And what’s more...” Raul lowered his voice. “I’ve heard rumors that the captain, Squallow, kidnaps kids and eats them.”

“He eats kids...?”

Images of Tetra, Shirley, and Rain flashed through my mind.

“My boss would never...”

“Shut up,” Rosalind said.

“Grmph!”

Fam tried to talk, but Rosalind put her hand over her mouth.

“See? So chasing after the likes of them is a bad idea.”

“But I don’t buy the whole him eating kids thing. Especially now with Fam right here.”

Fam was a pirate, but she was young enough that you could call her a kid. If that huge man—Squallow, Raul said—really ate kids, then he probably would have eaten her first.

“Well, maybe that part’s not true,” Raul said. “But he’s definitely kidnapping them. You just saw him nab your friends, right? The Seageists are bad news.”

“That’s why we’re going to save them.”

Tetra had been with me for a while now, and Rain and Shirley had both been great to me here on this planet. We were all friends. If the people who’d kidnapped them really were dangerous, then it was all the more reason to save them.

“You really are stubborn, you know that?” Raul said, shaking his head. “I know you care about them, but why not let the Estashionian army handle the baddies?”

“You’re the one who said they weren’t ordinary pirates. They took out almost an entire fleet, right? If we leave now, we can catch up to them. I’m going.”

“Kid, that’s not what I was trying to say...” Raul scratched his head.

"I don't have any more time to waste here. Rosalind, let's g—"

"Hold it! If you're really going, then I'm going with you."

"Huh? Why?"

"Hmm... Well, I guess I feel like I've come so far that I can't just give up on you now." Raul gave me a particularly suspect grin and a thumbs-up.

I really didn't know what to do with this guy...

"Fine. Let's get going then."

"Wait, Rekka. We're heading into enemy territory. We need to do this as safely as possible," Rosalind said.

"And how are we going to do that?"

Rosalind's lips curled up into a smile, revealing her vampire fangs.

"Simple. This."

Her eyes flashed a strange shade of red as she looked down at Fam.

"Now, look into my eyes..."

"Mggh, mggh..."

She was using her vampire charm power, which could put her victim under a powerful kind of hypnosis.

"...There."

"Are you done?"

"Yeah. I kept it simple: she can't lie to us, and she can't disobey us."

"Ugh... What did you do?" Fam groaned, blinking her eyes repeatedly.

"You left her mind intact, right?" I asked.

"Powerful charm spells sap my strength. We don't know what's ahead of us, so it's best to conserve my power. I guess it wouldn't hurt to make sure it's working, though. Bark."

"Woof! H-Huh?!"

Fam was shocked to find herself obeying Rosalind. In my case, my entire mind had been warped to justify obeying the charm spell, but it seemed to be different with Fam. Rosalind must have used a weaker, more energy-efficient version on her.

"Seems like it worked fine. All right, little girl, lead us to your pirate ship."

And so Fam began to take us to where her crew was.

"Huh? We're not heading for the entrance gate?"

I'd thought the only way in and out of the undersea dome was through the gate, but come to think of it, how had the pirates broken in in the first place? If they'd tried to force their way in by breaking through the dome, the pressure collapse would've crushed us all. Including them.

"Fam, how did the pirates get into the undersea dome?"

"We used pressurized miniature spaceships to come in through a water duct."

"A water duct?"

"All the water that's used here in the city is filtered and sent back into the sea. But those ducts aren't supposed to open from the outside..." Raul said, confused.

"How did you guys get it open then, Fam?"

"I don't know," she said as she looked away.

Since she was under the effect of Rosalind's charm spell, she must really not have known. The mystery remained, but it seemed like the pirates were headed back for the duct. We followed them into the underground water system. When we got to the ducts near the edge of the dome, we found four small pirate ships that must have been what they used to get inside.

"Fam, do you know which of those Squallow is on?"

The girls were probably wherever he was.

"We came in with five ships. The boss must already be back at the main ship."

"Hmm..."

Then that meant we'd have to make it to their flagship.

"We might be able to have the girl come up with some excuse to get us on one of the little ships," Rosalind said. "But if any of the people we defeated at Ryugu Palace are on board, we'll have problems."

"That's true. They've seen our faces."

Was there any way to keep them from recognizing us? Hmm...

"I know. Can't we have Raul disguise us?"

"Oh, hmm... Yeah, I guess."

Raul must have still been a little iffy about coming with us because his answer was mumbled and hesitant. But since he'd already demonstrated his disguise skills for us, I wasn't letting him out of this one.

"All right, get to work then," I said.

"...Sure thing."

Raul put some kind of makeup on us. He then ripped our clothes here and there, adding water and mud to make us look more like pirates.

"I wore this new outfit just for today, too..." Rosalind whispered ruefully.

"Hmm, what else? We could add some grimy capes and bandanas to make you look more like Fam, I guess. They'd help hide your faces, too."

Raul took a small scrap of fabric out of his pocket. With a flick of the wrist, it grew to hundreds of times its original size until it became a cape like a gunslinger out of the Old West might have worn.

"W-Wow, that's one heck of a magic trick."

"Nah, this is just something I bought at the store. The mermaids use something similar to fold up their pants when they want to use their fins."

No joke, space technology is out of this world.

We spent a couple of minutes getting into disguise, then my cell phone began to ring in my pocket. It was Iris. I suddenly remembered that she'd modified her phone so that she could call me anywhere in the universe. (Though I couldn't call her back.)

"Hello? Sorry, but I need you to talk in a whisper."

"Rekka... Where are you?" The voice on the other end of the line sounded nervous. "Tetra and Shirley went to the bathroom and haven't come back. Hibiki and I searched the third floor, but we can't find them! And then...!"

"Calm down, Iris."

She was starting to freak out, so I gave her a second to chill before getting her up to speed.

"We're about to board a pirate ship."

"Then I'll go, too!"

"Sorry, but there's no time."

There was now only one ship that hadn't left yet. There was no time to wait for everybody else.

"Iris, I want you to go help the injured."

"...Fine. Be careful. And make sure you come back safe, okay?"

"Yeah, leave it to me."

I hung up and put the phone back in my pocket.

"Okay, let's go."

"Very well. All right, girl. Come up with some story to feed them to keep them from suspecting us."

"All right." Fam nodded unhappily.

We followed her up to the entrance of the ship. One of the pirates saw Fam and looked at us suspiciously.

"Hm? Is that you, Fam? Who are those people with you?"

"The kids are street orphans. The old guy's a drifter, he says. They want to come with us, so I brought them."

"...I see. Then get them on board quick."

The man seemed to find nothing particularly unusual about what Fam said. He let us on without any more questions.

I raised an eyebrow at this development. Rosalind had told Fam to come up with a lie that wouldn't sound suspicious, and she apparently had done so admirably. But...

"Hey, is it normal for pirates to let drifters and orphans on their ship?" I whispered to Rosalind.

"Well, most outlaws get their start because they've run out of food to eat. And sometimes people with nowhere else to go gang up and form groups of bandits or pirates."

Really? I thought pirates were just, you know, bad guys. People who wanted the chance to hurt others. Of course, some of them probably were, but maybe some weren't? Based on how nonchalantly the guy who let us in responded to Fam's story, the Seageists must have been in the habit of taking in people who had nowhere else to go. They were still pirates, though...

When the rest of the crew boarded the ship, we took off. We escaped through the ducts out to the sea, and then we went to the surface. Without the drag from the water, we accelerated and began to climb higher and higher into the air. I looked out the window and saw a huge space battleship in the skies of Berano, far larger than the one I was inside right now.

"So, that's the Seageists' ship?"

"It's sizable, isn't it?" Rosalind said as she looked up at it, too. "You'd need a crew of 500 to man that thing."

Raul leaned forward and rested his chin on the top of my head.

"Nah," he casually said. "Ships of that class all have an autopilot. As long as you've got 50 people on the main bridge, you can run it just fine."

"Wow, that's amazing. And get off my head!"

"Gyah! Oww!"

Raul bit his tongue when I jerked my head upwards, leaving him squirming in pain.

After that, once we were safely aboard the main ship, we hid ourselves in Fam's room in the crew block.

"Damn it! I can't believe they just let people like you on!"

As soon as we got inside and shut the door, Fam started screaming and dropped to the floor.

"Hey, is the charm still working?"

"If there's nobody around, she can talk freely. It doesn't go against my orders not to disobey us," Rosalind said as she lay down on the room's bed.

"Oh, right. Where is this ship heading?"

"Planet Gail. Our home. It'll take about two hours at high-speed warp... Gah! Why won't my mouth stop talking?!" Fam yanked at the corners of her lips.

"Hmm. Now that we know where their base is, can we get the Estashionians to destroy the pirates for us?"

Raul shrugged.

"The reason the Seageists have never been caught, at least if you believe the rumors, is that no one has ever been able to track their ship in warp space."

"I see. And why is that, girl?"

"The space around Gail has a disturbed magnetic field. Normal spaceships can't warp through it. Our ship has a special coating, so we can... Jeez!"

Fam started to pound at her head with her fists, but Rosalind paid her antics no mind.

"So, you need some kind of 'coating,' whatever that is. I guess we won't be able to count on reinforcements there. When we leave, we'll need to steal an enemy ship then."

"Okay! You just leave finding a ship for the trip home to me," Raul said.

"Yes, it's the perfect job for a sneak thief like you."

As we discussed things, a voice came over the PA system announcing that we were soon entering warp. Warp space was a one-way trip. Even if we saved the other girls now, we wouldn't be able to escape. We'd have to make our move once we landed at the pirate base. Our job now was to sneak onto planet Gail, get back the girls, and then steal a ship to get out of there.

"They said it would take two hours to warp, didn't they? Rekka, you should get some rest," Rosalind said. "You need to conserve your strength."

"Yeah."

I borrowed half the bed so that I could lie down, too. Raul came over, as well, but Rosalind kicked him away. Fam was still on the floor pounding at her head.

Tetra, Rain, Shirley... Please be safe.

▽

When we came out of warp, the pirate ship had arrived at planet Gail. If Berano was a blue planet, Gail was a brown one. Almost the entire surface looked like it was nothing but dust and dirt. There was barely any ocean, but for some reason, the land around that tiny sliver of blue was silver.

"What's that silver area?"

"Probably what's left over from a terraforming process. That's when you artificially change the environment, mostly so that people can live somewhere they normally couldn't."

I remembered hearing about something like that to make it possible for humans to live on the moon or Mars one day. With how advanced space technology was, I could believe they'd figured it out already.

The pirate ship landed in a terraformed residential zone, touching down in the water next to what looked like a port.

“Wait, why are we at a port?” Raul asked.

“What kind of question is that? Isn’t that what ships do?”

“Sure, but not spaceships. Can’t you see that building over there that looks like the main dock?”

Raul pointed out the window. I could see a huge building the size of a small mountain.

“That’s normally the kind of place you’d dock one of these, especially when you’ve been off-planet and need maintenance. Is there some reason we didn’t go there, Fam?”

“They’re making a new ship at the factory dock, so this ship can’t fit there… Ngwah!”

It must be tough to be under the control of a charm and not know it.

“How strange. I don’t know much about spaceships, but this one seems quite nice to me,” Rosalind said. “Do you need more firepower?”

“I don’t know. About a year ago, the boss suddenly started talking about building it.” Fam had an unhappy look on her face that had nothing to do with the charm.

There was no point in hanging around, so we decided to make a move. Of course, we didn’t forget our disguises. After asking around a little, we found that Squallow and the girls had gone to the huge facility Raul had pointed out. The locals just called it “the factory.” Apparently it wasn’t just a dock, but also a cybernetics and terraforming lab. In addition, it functioned as a command post for the pirates.

“Why would they take the girls someplace like that?” I asked.

“I couldn’t tell you,” Rosalind replied. “We’ll just have to go see.”

Since staying too close to the other pirates would restrict our options, we took a route to the factory that led us down a bunch of side streets. Fam had chosen (at Rosalind’s orders) a road lined on both sides with huge metal boxes. Were they prefab houses? Of course, they were probably made from different materials than what we used on Earth, but this seemed to be a residential area.

“I thought pirates lived on their ships. Or in caves or something.”

“You’ve got some weird ideas, you know that?” Raul said.

Sorry, I only know what I read in manga.

“You can tell from looking at it that this planet was abandoned after it went to rot. There aren’t many pirates who’d go through the trouble of terraforming a place like this. A hideout where you can’t be followed by warp is probably an enticing proposition, but even so…”

“Even so?”

“There are a lot of civilians here.”

"Now that you mention it..."

I realized that the only people I'd seen on this street looked very different than the pirates who'd attacked Berano. Many of them were women or children, and there were plenty of men that didn't look like ruffians. But that wasn't the only thing I realized. No, maybe I really did just have weird ideas about pirates. Maybe it was nothing from Rosalind and Raul's perspectives, but...

We suddenly ran into trouble.

"Oh, it's Big Sis Fam!"

Fam was walking out in front of the rest of us. The kids who saw her came running up to us.

"You're back already?"

"Who are those people?"

We were instantly surrounded by children and had to stop.

"Get them off our backs, girl," Rosalind ordered in a gruff whisper.

"Oh, um... They're going to be new members of our family."

"The old guy, too?"

"I'm not that old, kiddo." Raul winked.

He didn't seem particularly put off or flustered. He might've looked like a wimp, but he was quick on his feet and always on his game.

"Come on, say hello to your new family. Hello!" Fam motioned to the kids.

"Hello!" they all called out in a cheerful greeting to us.

"H-Hello," I responded, a little stunned.

Rosalind had probably never even met a kid who was friendly to her. She looked absolutely astonished. I was, too, to tell the truth.

All the kids here on this planet were smiling. And it wasn't just the kids. The adults and even the old people were all smiling, too. That was the biggest discrepancy I'd realized between this place and what I'd thought a pirate planet would be like.

Were these kids kidnapped like Raul had suggested? If so, why did they look so happy? There was a jarring difference between my image of the Seageists and the smiling faces I was seeing.

"Fam, who are these kids?"

"They're orphans from all over the galaxy. Just like I was. I'd almost starved to death when the boss took me in." Fam patted the head of one of the happy children. "The Seageists were originally space refugees. The boss brought them all together, but we had to turn to piracy to make sure everybody had enough food."

"..."

Raul told me they kidnapped children. I had no idea that the truth was the exact opposite. They were helping children.

"That's how most outlaws get their start."

Rosalind didn't seem shocked at all. Was that just the gap in life experience between us?

"We don't attack the weak. We only take from fat pigs who have far more than they need. And it's just so we can survive, not so we can have luxuries..."

"I have no interest whatsoever in whether you're good or evil," Rosalind said. She then turned to look at me. "Rekka, don't you go getting sentimental, either. You're not here to defeat evil or serve the cause of justice, are you? You're here to save your friends."

"...Yeah, that's right."

The only reason we were here was to save Tetra and the other girls. Nothing else.

"But I might need to rethink some things. That Squallow guy might not be so bad after all."

"Listen, Rekka. I just told you not to get sentimental."

"That's not it. Listen to me." I cut off Rosalind before she could repeat herself again. "If he was a real bad guy, he might kidnap people or hurt people in search of treasure. But maybe he's not, right? So there might be some reason why he's doing this."

Kult Graphimore, for instance, was just after Hibiki to save his world. For a normally good person do evil things, there's some reason behind it.

"Rekka might have a point," Raul said. "I'm a good guy at heart, too, you know."

"You just do everything on the spur of the moment."

"Hahahaha." He just laughed at me.

"Well, I can't totally agree, but... how about it, girl? Do you have any idea why this 'boss' of yours attacked Berano, stole the Mermaid Princess's Tear, and then kidnapped our comrades?"

"...No." Fam tilted her head down a little as she answered, and then motioned for the kids to get going. "The boss changed about a year ago. Out of the blue, he started spending all this money on a new ship, and we started doing more raids to get the cash for it."

"That doesn't quite mesh with what you just told us."

Rosalind pointed out earlier that the ship that attacked Berano was already plenty for their needs. It seemed odd that he'd take money they needed to feed people and use it for a ship that he didn't need, especially when it meant doing extra work to pay for it.

"Did anything else change?"

"...The old boss would never have turned his blade on a kid," Fam said with a glance in my direction.

I remembered how surprised she'd been when Squallow had attacked Rosalind. Maybe that was why she'd protected me from him when he came after me.

"I owe the boss my life." Tears welled up in Fam's eyes as she spoke. "The boss said he'd make us a real country on this planet. He even had plans to make the soil usable and start schools for the kids. He said that once we all had enough to be happy on our own, we could stop being pirates... And I wanted to help him! But he changed so suddenly... And the rest of the Seageists started acting all weird, too! Damn it! I don't want to tell you this stuff!"

Fam was yelling, but she started to choke up. She had to stop to wipe away the tears. I didn't like the idea of forcing her to tell us all this, but maybe it was for the best for her to say it out loud. It must have hurt to keep it inside.

"R..." I whispered.

She nodded and said, "Yup, you nailed it."

For all her faults, R was quick on the uptake. She already knew that I was going to ask her whether or not Fam was a heroine.

"I see... I'm glad."

"Glad?"

"Yeah."

If Fam was a heroine, that meant that I could help her story. I put my hand on her head as she sobbed.

"Cry all you want. And once you're done, let's go see your boss. We can ask him why he attacked Berano and stole the Mermaid Princess's Tear, and why he kidnapped my friends."

"Huh... What's gotten into you? Why would you want to know that?"

“Remember what I just said? There might be some reason Squallow is acting this way. If we can figure that out, we might find out what changed him. We might find out some other way to solve all this. It’s just a possibility, but if Squallow really is who you say he is, it’s worth talking to him.”

“Rekka, you always...” Rosalind sighed in resignation.

“Sorry. That’s just who I am.”

She sighed heavily again instead of answering.

“Rekka, don’t tell me you’re seriously going to get involved in pirate problems.” Raul, who didn’t know me well yet, seemed pretty taken aback at the prospect. “Give it up. You’re just a little boy. Why do you have to go that far?”

“If it’s too much for you, that’s fine.”

“Hahh... Looks like I got myself into more than I bargained for.”

Raul’s sigh was several times heavier than Rosalind’s. He put his face in his palm as if to say he wanted nothing to do with this.

“Where’s all this coming from, anyway? How can I even believe...”

Fam was looking at me doubtfully with tears still in the corners of her eyes, but I didn’t blame her. If your enemy suddenly started saying things like that, why on earth *would* you trust them?

“Rosalind, undo Fam’s charm.”

“What?” Rosalind asked as her expression soured. “You’re certain? If I do, she’ll be free. She could call for help, and then we’d be trapped on an enemy planet with nowhere to run.”

“But she’ll never trust us if we don’t give her free will, right?”

“Hahh... Here.” Rosalind sighed and waved her hands over Fam’s eyes. “Girl, you’re free of my spell now. If you want to run, you can.”

Fam continued to look at us in skeptical silence and took a few steps in the other direction. Once she realized that she could move unfettered, she turned back to us.

If we just wanted to trick Fam, it would be a stupid idea to release her from the charm spell. It’d only come back to bite us. I was hoping she would realize that.

“What is it you want to do?” Fam asked me.

“It’s normal to want to help a kid, okay?” I laughed.

Intermission 2

Planet Gail.

Tetra, Shirley, and Rain were taken by the pirate captain Squallow Low to the factory. They could hear the heavy breathing from beneath his mask, but he never said a word. He just led them deeper into the facility. According to the signs on the walls, they were headed to some kind of lab.

Tetra did her best to hide her fear as she held Rain and Shirley's hands tightly. Their hands were shaking, of course. Rain in particular seemed to even lack the strength to clutch her hand back, but Shirley was scared, too. Tetra was putting all her effort into hiding it, but she was just as terrified as they were.

But the three girls walked along in silence. Not one of them was strong enough to fight or run. Fortunately, they'd been safe so far, but if Squallow turned violent, they would be helpless. The thought was too much to bear.

"It'll be okay. Rekka will come save us."

So Tetra tried to try to cheer the others up by putting her hopes into words.

"But Rekka's just a normal person, right? W-Will he really come save us from these pirates?"

Shirley frowned, but Tetra nodded as firmly as she could.

"Rekka's really somebody you can count on."

"...You really believe in him, don't you?"

"Of course."

"I'm jealous... I don't have anybody like that. Nobody's going to come save me..."

"Don't worry. Rekka will save you, too, Shirley."

"Even me?"

"Yup," Tetra said confidently.

The boy she knew named Rekka Namidare would never abandon his friends at a time like this.

"You, too, Rain, so cheer up. Rekka will figure something out."

"..."

Tetra turned to Rain and repeated herself, but there was no answer. Rain was deathly pale. She was walking mechanically forward with her face toward the ground. She looked like she hadn't even heard Tetra.

It's normal to be afraid, but somehow...

Rain seemed to be afraid for a different reason than Tetra and Shirley. Her stiff expression betrayed her. She was afraid, but it wasn't of sudden violence. Her fear was more like that of a criminal about to be judged.

"Rai—"

Tetra started to call to her when Squallow suddenly stopped walking. The huge pirate silently turned and looked down on the three girls with his terrifying eyes. He then opened the door to the room next to where they were standing and threw Tetra and Rain inside.

"Kyah!"

Tetra was thrown in so violently that she hit her shoulder hard on the floor when she landed.

"Ugh… Rain! Are you okay?"

"I-I'm all right," Rain answered weakly. She'd landed much the same way.

The door shut noisily behind them.

"Shirley!" Tetra cried.

The room was dark, but she didn't care. Tetra's eyes shone like a cat's as she ran up to the door. She screamed, but there was no answer. Shirley was being taken somewhere else? But why? The door to the room was so thick that Tetra couldn't even hear their footsteps through it. She had no way of knowing what had happened to Shirley.

"Shirley!" she screamed again, but her words just echoed in the darkness.

▽

On planet Berano, three hours had passed since the pirate attack.

Casualties among the tourists and merfolk were surprisingly light, but many of the police who'd tried to protect the town had been injured. The clinics in Ryugu Palace City were soon over their heads in patients, so the spacious Ryugu Palace was opened up as a temporary relief shelter.

"Satsuki! Use a healing spell on these people!"

"Okay!"

"Harissa, you get the ones over there!"

"S-S-Sure thang!"

Satsuki and Harissa had joined the group of healers and doctors tending to the injured. Their magic and sorcery was every bit as powerful as space medicine, so they were running around helping the patients that needed it most.

"Suzuran, hold their legs."

"Okay."

Hibiki and Suzuran knew first aid, so they were helping the doctors.

"Tsumiki, bring more hot water!

"Iris, that's too many towels! I can't see in front of me!"

Even Tsumiki and Iris, who had no idea how to do any of those things, were volunteering to carry towels and hot water. But between the group of them, their hard work paid off. Before long, all the wounded had been treated, and there was a moment to relax.

"Wow, even I'm tired..."

Iris took a deep breath as she collapsed onto the floor. The other girls weren't in much better shape.

"I-I used all my magic power, too..."

"But we managed to save everybody who was brought in, right?"

Satsuki and Harissa were leaning up against each other's backs, both looking half-dead.

"But you know... the damage to the town was a lot less than I expected," Hibiki said after she'd had a chance to catch her breath.

It was a good thing that there were so few wounded, but Hibiki wasn't the only one wondering about how that had happened. Iris had her own opinions on the matter.

"Rekka said on the phone that the pirates might be after the Mermaid Princess's Tear."

"Then maybe they only attacked the town as a decoy tactic. That's probably why the tourists, who ran away at the first sign of trouble, were mostly unharmed, while the police that fought back were the ones that got hurt," Hibiki mused.

"Given the lack of damage, the odds that it was a feint are pretty high. But were they really after the Mermaid Princess's Tear?" Suzuran asked.

"Iris, do you know anything about the Mermaid Princess's Tear?" Hibiki asked in turn.

"Huh? Why are you asking me?"

"You're the only person here who's from outer space. If any of us happened to know a few space rumors, it would be you."

"Hmm... I don't know. I've never heard of it. And if there's something we don't know, why can't we just have Satsuki look it up?"

Everyone turned towards Satsuki, whose shoulders slumped dejectedly.

"I'm sorry. I'm out of mana from healing. It'll be a few hours before I can use any magic again."

"I see..."

Iris didn't know anything about magic, but she'd seen how hard Satsuki had been working for hours to help people with her magic. If she said she needed to recover, then she probably did.

"Wait, why don't we just ask Rain's mom about the merfolk treasure? She's the queen, right?" Tsumiki asked.

But Iris and Hibiki shook their heads.

"That's not possible, sadly."

"Why not?"

"The queen is missing."

"Huh?" Tsumiki looked at them strangely.

Iris and Hibiki had already gone up to the top floor where the queen supposedly was in order to get her permission to move the wounded into Ryugu Palace. But when they arrived, no one was there.

"What is it you want to do?"

"I don't know. Rekka went upstairs to save her, but when I talked on the phone, he wasn't being clear. If the queen was kidnapped with Tetra and the others, he probably would've said something."

"It's possible that the queen was taken somewhere by herself without Rekka knowing about it," said Hibiki. She had a good point, but it was only a guess.

An awkward silence settled in the room as the girls ran out of things to talk about. Nothing had changed, and at times like this, knowing that there was nothing you could do only made it harder.

"...Yeah. I know what to do. I'm going up to the surface," Iris said in a deliberately cheerful voice in an attempt to make everyone feel better.

"What are you going to do there?"

"See if the Estashionian army is here. They're taking longer than they should."

"I see. Then I'll go with you."

Hibiki stood up and went with Iris. No one else seemed to have the strength left to stand, so the two robust girls went up alone.

"Looks like they're not here yet," Hibiki said as she looked up at the night sky.

"That's strange. One of their warships should've been here a long time ago."

Iris tilted her head in confusion as she looked around. To her surprise, she spotted a woman's figure lying on the beach.

"Marle?"

Rain's servant Marle looked up and gasped. Her face was wet with something that clearly wasn't seawater, and Iris quickly tried to get to the bottom of it.

"A-Are you okay? Did you get hurt...? Or did the pirates do something to you?"

"No... I... I..."

Marle burst into contrite tears again as she explained her sad tale. Her daughter had been taken hostage by the pirates, and they'd forced her to help them if she ever wanted to see her again. In other words, the one who'd let them in through the underwater ducts was…

But the story ended as sadly as it had begun. The town had been destroyed. Plenty of people had been hurt. Queen Muse and her princess daughter were nowhere to be found.

"And it's all my fault…"

Iris recalled how she'd met Marle that afternoon. She was crying for help, and the ones harassing her were pirates.

"It's all the pirates' fault. So don't blame yourself."

Iris softly put her hand on Marle's shoulder as her heart filled with anger towards the pirates.

How dare they take children as hostages?! Rekka, go ahead and kick all their butts!

Knowing Rekka had gone after the pirates, she prayed that he would avenge the pain in Marle's heart.

Krrrsh… Krrrsh…

The sea was now much rougher than it had been during the day, and the choppy waves lapped up at their feet on the shore.

Chapter 3: Who Changed What?

Once we arrived at the factory, we let Fam take the lead so that the other pirates wouldn't be suspicious. She took us on a meandering path through the facility.

"It feels like everybody's working hard. They look busy."

"I think the docks are just bustling because work on the new ship is almost complete. But after we finish a job like this, everyone's bodies need maintenance, so the lab will be busy, too."

So we came at rush hour, huh? Well, I guess it wasn't so bad. If everybody was caught up in their own business, they'd be paying less attention to us.

"All right. As promised, I'll go look for an escape craft."

"Yeah, that's fine, but..."

I had Fam's story to worry about now, too. I wasn't planning on leaving immediately... though I guess it wouldn't hurt to have a backup.

"Okay, off I go!"

Raul gave another completely unnecessary wink and wandered off on his own, leaving the three of us behind. From there, we began to plot our next move.

"So, what's our first objective?" Rosalind asked.

"Hmm... It'll be hard to talk to Squallow when he's got hostages. We should try and find the girls first."

"They're probably in the brig," Fam said and turned to show us the way. "This planet still doesn't have a police force, so when there's trouble in the living spaces or somebody goes too far during a job, they get put in the brig."

"Huh."

"We also sometimes put children here when they play naughty tricks."

"...Sounds more like time out than prison," Rosalind said.

But regardless of what it was, it did sound like there was a good chance it was where the girls had been taken. And so we went to the so-called prison, trying our best not to stand out. Fortunately, it didn't seem like a popular area, so there wasn't anyone around.

"This looks just like a normal room. It's not a cell?"

"We're all family, and we all ride on the same ship. You wouldn't put your family in a prison cell, would you? This room can't be opened from the inside, and that's good enough."

Fam tapped at the door panel. There was a heavy clunking sound as the thick doors opened. That explained it. It wasn't jail, but it was a prison in the sense that there was no way to escape from the inside.

When the door opened, we could see that there was no light. Maybe being trapped here in the dark was part of the punishment. But in the middle of that darkness, a pair of small red lights turned towards me. It was Tetra's eyes shining in the pitch-black room.

"Tetra."

"Rekka..."

When she heard my voice, there was shifting in the darkness. With the light streaming in from the hallway, I could see that she and Rain were holding one another. Rain followed Tetra's gaze, and soon her tiny face was looking up at us, too.

"Rekka... why are you dressed like that?'

"I disguised myself to get inside. Tetra, Rain, I'm glad you're safe."

"Yes... I believed... I believed you'd come."

Tetra lent Rain her shoulder, and the two of them slowly stood up.

"See, Rain? Rekka came for us. It's okay now."

Rain was now silently staring downward.

"What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

"No... That's not it..." Rain said in a faint, indistinct voice.

"Hey, where's Shirley?"

Of the three kidnapped girls, I only counted two in the dark room.

"Shirley was taken somewhere else."

"What?! Why?"

"I don't know. We were all kidnapped by a big man, but Rain and I were thrown in here, and Shirley was taken somewhere alone...'

"That big man's probably Squallow, the pirate captain."

But if he took Shirley specifically somewhere else, did that mean he wanted something special from her in particular? Whatever. Either way, as long as Squallow had her...

"Tetra, Rain. I'm going to find Squallow."

"To save Shirley? Then I'll go with you," Tetra volunteered.

"Wait. Saving Shirley is part of my job, but there's one more thing... I'm going to talk with Squallow."

"What?!" both girls gasped in surprise.

"W-Why?"

Rain seemed especially shocked. Her whole body was trembling.

"Fam... I guess you two don't know who that is. One of the pirate girls here says that Squallow started to act really strange a year ago. She says he's not the kind of guy... that would do something like this."

I almost trailed off mid-sentence. I was going to find Squallow in order to save Fam's story, but Rain was going to avenge her mother.

"If something did change Squallow, then I want to help him somehow. So, um… Rain, if it's not too painful, there's something I want you to tell me."

I watched her face closely and chose my words carefully.

"…What is it?"

In a way, I was going to help the man who'd killed her mother. But instead of looking at me with rage or hatred, she was only looking at me with weak eyes.

"…What is a merman?"

She flinched and looked down at her feet.

Tetra looked back and forth between the two of us.

…Was that a rude question or something? When Squallow's mask split and revealed his face, Rain had called him a "merman," so I thought she might know something, but…

"It's okay. If it's something you don't want to talk about, don't worry. You don't have to."

"A merman is…"

But Rain cut me off with reluctant, weighty words. It was almost as if she had to force herself to speak.

"Mermen… were originally a type of merfolk that lived on this planet."

"They were?"

I was surprised. Did that mean Squallow originally lived on planet Berano?

"Wait a second. Are you telling me he attacked his own home planet? Why would he do that?"

"It has to do with the history of planet Berano and the merman expulsion…"

"The merman expulsion?"

According to Rain, the merman expulsion was a mass eviction by the government. A long time ago, just after Berano was discovered by the Galactic Federation, the planet experienced a huge influx of visiting aliens. And not all of them meant well. Many were there to kidnap the merfolk. They lived their lives peacefully underwater, and had no way to protect themselves from evil alien invaders.

"In order to protect the planet, Berano turned to Estashion, one of the most important planets of the Galactic Federation, for help. Estashion agreed to protect Berano, but in return, they demanded the expulsion of the mermen."

"…What? How does expelling them protect them?"

"Estashion agreed to protect Berano because they wanted the profits it would generate as a tourist destination. The beauty of the mermaids was good for gathering lots of tourists." Rain's tone was self-mocking.

"But what's that got to do with expelling the mermen?"

"Did you forget how ugly that big man looked, Rekka?"

"...!"

"I don't know if all mermen are like that, but if they are, they'd be a problem for anyone who wanted to market this mermaid planet for its native beauty," Rosalind said.

Rain didn't deny it. She just looked down.

"The expulsion of the mermen was carried out by Estashion, but my mother cooperated with it. That was about fifty years ago."

So Rain's mother was involved? Was that why she looked so pained over this?

"...What the hell? So then the boss is a victim, too!"

Fam glared at Rain. The mermaid princess shrunk back and apologized in a tone that made it sound like she was about to cry.

"So, Squallow is after revenge on the mermaids who banished him?"

"That's probably the case. He stole the Mermaid Princess's Tear before he left."

"You mean that blue jewel?"

I remembered the blue jewel that Squallow had been holding when we encountered him at Ryugu Palace.

"Yes. But it isn't just any gem. It has a strange power to control the weather on Berano."

"C-Control the weather?!"

Something like that would have to be incredibly powerful!

"The seas of Berano weren't always as calm as they are now. There were storms and tidal waves on a daily basis, and the merfolk suffered for it. Then the first mermaid princess begged the gods for help, and she was given the Mermaid Princess's Tear. At least, that's how the story goes. Ever since then, Berano has had calm, eternal summer, and the mermaid princess's family and the king of the mermen have watched over it and kept its secret."

"The king of the mermen...? Then Squallow is..."

"That's right. I don't have anything else to go on, but if he knew about the Mermaid Princess's Tear, then he's probably part of the mermen royal family. The name Squallow is likely an assumed one..."

So Squallow was the former king of the mermen? It was a shocking revelation, but there wasn't much time to dwell on it now. There was one more thing I had to ask.

"What happens... without the tear?"

"Berano will probably return to its original, turbulent weather. Merfolk are weak creatures, so not many will be able to survive that kind of change in environment. Especially not the children..."

We were all taken aback at what Rain said.

"No... Boss wouldn't..."

"Fam."

I put my hand on Fam's shoulder before she could fall to the ground. She didn't knock it away like she usually did. Instead, she just leaned into me.

Fam then told us that the attack on Berano had been Squallow's idea and his goal was indeed to steal the Mermaid Princess's Tear, which sure made it sound like his goal was to wipe out the mermaids.

"...Believe."

"Huh?"

"Your boss wouldn't do something like that, right?"

But maybe that was just what it sounded like, nothing more. Maybe there was something else going on. Maybe he had some kind of reason we didn't know about. Maybe I was just being too optimistic. But...

"If you believe in Squallow, then I'll believe in you, who believes in him, and I'll give him a chance. And if... if he really was after revenge, let's both do our best to stop him. Without your help, I can't do that."

"...My help?"

"That's right. I only know one side of Squallow, but you know that he's a great guy who helps children and the weak, right? You know both sides of him, so you're the only one who can persuade him. So help me do that."

I offered Fam my hand. She reached out to take it, but then knocked it away.

"Hmph! Don't try and impress me, you wimp! I'll find out the truth about the boss on my own!"

"Well, that works, too, I guess."

I chuckled and lowered my hand.

"Rain..."

I turned to the mermaid princess, whose lips were tightly pressed together in emotional agony.

"I'm sorry. I know your mom just died. I didn't mean to pour salt on the wound."

"No... the truth is the truth. It's natural for the mermen to hate my mother. That's what I think..."

Rain looked down.

"But..." she said with her lower lip quivering.

Was there anything I could do for her? Anything? She was a heroine, and I had the bloodline of the Namidare, right? There was no way Rain's story was going to have a happy ending with her crying like this.

"Rekka, we're wasting time here," Rosalind said.

"R-Right."

The clock was ticking against us with every passing second. We still didn’t know if Shirley was okay. Like Rosalind hinted, we needed to get a move on.

“Um, Rekka...” Rain suddenly said in a weak voice as she looked up at me.

“What is it?”

“Um... Can you take me to see Squallow, too?”

“Huh?”

“I want to meet him and talk to him. I don’t know what I’ll say to him, but...” Rain’s voice and shoulders were both shaking now.

Hmm.... Given the timing and the situation, R had said Rain’s story might be about rescuing a kidnapped princess, but as far as I was concerned, Rain’s happy ending was the one she wanted. The girl in front of me was terrified, but she wanted to face her fear more than she wanted to run from it. She wanted a different ending than being saved.

“...All right. Let’s go together.”

In that case, it was my job to help her. Now the next question was where Squallow and Shirley were...

“Fam, do you know where the two of them might be?”

“The boss is usually in the captain’s quarters, but I don’t know where he might’ve taken that Shirley girl.”

“I see...”

She had to be somewhere in the facility. Would we just have to search it at random?

“Hey, is that you, Fam? What are you doing here?”

We all froze at the strange voice.

At least on the outside. I thought my heart was going to burst out of my chest. Everyone fearfully turned towards the door. Since it couldn’t be opened from inside, we’d left it unlocked. It was an automatic sliding door that would only open if you walked near it, so we thought we’d be okay, but I guess we’d gotten unlucky.

“Rosa—”

Rosalind was on the move before I could even say her name. She closed in on the pirate in an instant, but she didn’t attack. Instead, she looked deep into his eyes and used her charm on him. His head immediately drooped as he fell into a daze.

“Hmph. That was close.”

Rosalind dragged the man inside where he couldn’t be seen from the hallway.

“Well, this could work out well for us. Let’s see if he knows where Squallow is.”

Rosalind began to interrogate her new puppet.

▽

When Rosalind was done questioning him, we locked the pirate in the brig and made our way to the deepest parts of the lab area. That’s where he’d said Squallow had taken Shirley.

We headed for the room in the far back, keeping Rain and Tetra between us like prisoners, but several of the pirates we encountered along the way were suspicious. Squallow had apparently kept the girls at his side the entire time they were aboard the ship, so many of the pirates remembered them.

“I should’ve borrowed those disguise tools from Raul...” I mumbled.

“I don’t think you could use makeup even if you had it, Rekka,” Rosalind said.

“A wig and a coat would do, honestly.”

Rain’s pink hair in particular made her stand out. None of the men that saw her could forget her beauty, so each time someone got too nosy, we had to rely on Rosalind’s “charm.” It got us through, I guess, but...

“Hmph. It seems I’ve used a bit too much of my power,” Rosalind sighed.

I was a little worried about that by the time we reached what looked like the end of the lab area. There was only one door, and we were the only ones in the hallway.

“This is pretty far away from everything else. What goes on in here?”

“There was a cybernetics engineer who came to stay with us about a year ago—the one that enhanced everyone’s cyborg bodies. The boss made this room for the engineer, but ever since they left, nobody uses this place.”

“Hmm, I remember Raul saying something about that...”

He’d mentioned that some kind of super-talented cybernetics engineer strengthened the Seageists’ weapons so that they could attack military supply ships. If they’d gotten their own workroom, it was probably a good sign they were being treated well around here.

“Fam, did that engineer put the blade in your arm?”

“No, all the equipment they dealt with was delicate stuff that had to do with brain waves. As a gremlin, I couldn’t get the operation. My arm blade is simple: you just push this button, and it comes out.”

Come to think of it, with the way Fam wrecked sensitive equipment, she couldn’t really use a cyborg body, could she? That headband probably helped a little by keeping her electromagnetic waves in check, but...

“Stay as close together as possible. If one of you gets taken as a hostage, I'll have a serious problem on my hands," Rosalind said as we approached the door.

Everybody but Fam nodded. Me included.

"I'm opening it now."

I took a deep breath and opened the door to the last room. It was filled with machines I couldn't even begin to guess the purpose of. But from the general atmosphere of the place, I got the sense that it was an operating room.

There were three people standing in the center of the room: Squallow the giant and his android secretary who looked at us in silence, and a young girl who looked at us in surprise.

"Tetra? And Rain? What are you doing here?" the girl—Shirley—asked. She didn't seem to understand what was going on.

"Boss..."

"Fam, please stay where you are."

The secretary stopped Fam before she could get any closer to Squallow.

"Why did you take these two out of the prison and bring them here? The others are not listed in my database. They aren't Seageists, now are they?" she asked coldly.

She'd realized instantly that we were outsiders. Since she was an android, maybe she had the faces the crewmembers logged in a memory bank of some kind.

How was I going to talk my way out of this one? No, we were here to see Squallow, and I wouldn't be able to do that while I was still disguised. I wanted to make sure Shirley was safe before anything went down, but they were already too cautious for me to get close like this.

Instead, I took off my jacket and wiped the makeup off my face. Rosalind did the same.

"R-Rekka?!" Shirley's eyes went wide when she saw who I really was. "Wh-What are you doing here?"

"I came to save everyone."

Shirley looked even more surprised at my answer. Maybe "surprised" wasn't the right word. It was like the idea had never even occurred to her. I didn't know what they'd been doing to her here, but shouldn't she have at least been a little relieved that help had arrived?

"Boss..."

"Fam, stop right there and explain this," the secretary warned Fam before she could approach again.

"I'm here to talk to the boss. You stay out of this." Fam ignored her and moved closer to Squallow. "Boss, that mermaid told me the story about how you were banished from Berano. She also told me that without this 'Mermaid Princess's Tear' that you stole, Berano is doomed.”

Squallow’s only answer for her was silence.

“Tell me… Did you attack Berano because you wanted revenge? If that’s it, then please… Please stop this. Think of the kids, boss! A lot of kids are gonna die! I understand how you feel, but I can’t stand the thought of the man that saved me with the blood of innocent children on his hands!”

With each word, she took another step towards Squallow as if she hoped that being closer to him would make him more likely to listen to her pleading.

But still, the only sound from Squallow was the mechanical breathing hissing through his mask. He never said a word.

It was… strange. Why wasn’t he saying anything? Why didn’t he answer her question, or try to explain? After hearing what she’d said, wouldn’t he at least want to defend himself?

“Fam, you led these people here and released two of our prisoners. You’ve betrayed the Seageists, haven’t you?”

Fam flinched when she heard the word “betrayed.”

“N-No! Boss, I didn’t mean to…”

“Captain, this is a clear case of betrayal. Deliver her punishment.”

Fam and the secretary talked over each other as they beseeched Squallow, who then gave his answer with a raised blade.

“No…”

“Rosalind!”

“Tch!”

I ran up to Fam, who was too stunned to move, and grabbed her by the hand. Rosalind turned her right arm into a wolf to block the blade with its fangs, but she was too far away.

Clang!

The loud, echoing sound of metal against metal rang out as his blade hit Fam’s headband.

“Agh!” Fam screamed, blood pouring out from beneath her headband.

That attack just now… Was he seriously trying to kill her?

“Squallow! I thought Fam was a part of your family! How could you attack your own family like that?!”

But again, there was nothing but breathy silence. Was he completely ignoring me?!

“Rekka, get the girl out of here! She’s in the way!” Rosalind yelled as she bared her fangs and jumped at Squallow.

Damn it! I knew there was a chance that diplomacy might not work, but I didn’t think he’d be this merciless.

“Rekka!” Tetra and Rain screamed in unison as they tried to run towards me.

"Get out of the room, both of you! Shirley, you get over here!" I yelled.

Shirley was panicking, unable to take in what was going on. But...

Clang! Clang! Clang!

"No way!"

A set of triple shutters suddenly slammed down where the door had been, locking us all inside.

"Tch!"

I could see the secretary standing a good distance from Squallow, tapping away on some kind of control panel. She must've been the one who activated the shutters. She wasn't planning on letting us escape!

"Shirley! Get to the back of the room!"

"R-Right!" Shirley yelled back, quickly moving to get out of the way of the fighting.

I tried to take Fam to another corner of the room, but halfway there, she came to her senses and started to struggle.

"H-Hey!"

"Let me go! Let me go!"

Fam shook me off and tried to run back towards where Rosalind and Squallow were clashing.

"It's too dangerous, Fam! Not now!"

I grabbed her again in the nick of time, and this time pulled her back as hard as I could.

"I don't care! The boss is family to me!"

She yelled like a child throwing a tantrum, kicking and flailing as she tried to get away. But I couldn't let her go.

"Boss! Why won't you say something?" Fam screamed as loud as she could at Squallow.

But the giant man remained silent.

At this point, even I was starting to get curious. Why wasn't Squallow saying anything at all? Did he really not want to answer that badly? Or... was it that he couldn't?

...Wait a second. What's going on here? Something about this seems familiar.

"Rekka! You're too close! You'll get caught up in the battle!"

Rosalind turned towards me, and...

"...You!"

"What?!"

I suddenly remembered.

That's right. I'd been through this before. A situation where somebody close to me ignored me no matter what I said... It was just like the time Lea and Iris were under the control of Rosalind's charm spell.

That would explain everything Squallow was doing that Fam said was so out of character, be it obsessing over a ship or even attacking children. But if, hypothetically, someone was controlling Squallow, then who was it? Who was making Squallow fight Rosalind right now?

“Fam, you said Squallow started to act strangely about a year ago, right?”

“Now’s not the time for that!”

“Just answer me! It’s important!”

“Yeah, it was a year ago! Who cares?”

“And when did that secretary start hanging around him all the time?!”

I pointed to the android secretary, who was still standing on the sidelines.

“It was... a year ago.”

The instant everything clicked, I left Fam with Tetra and Rain and started to run as fast as I could across the room.

The secretary’s emotionless eyes turned towards me.

I didn’t have any definitive proof that she was really behind this, but all signs were pointing to guilty.

I came to a stop right in front of her and pointed my stungun at her.

“Are you controlling Squallow?”

“What are you talking about?” she answered with a perfect poker face, just like you’d expect from an android.

The stungun wasn’t going to kill her, but if she really was controlling Squallow, knocking her out would mean that she shouldn’t be able to give new orders. That would be enough to find out the truth!

“Sorry, but I need you to take a little nap!” I apologized as I pulled the trigger, but...

“I refuse.”

Huh? She dodged the ball of lightning! Just how good was her reaction time?! I guess androids were a lot stronger than they looked.

In my surprise, I noticed a shadow suddenly appear that seemed to block out the light from overhead.

I looked up, and Squallow was almost on top of me, blade at the ready. I couldn’t get out of the way in time!

“Stop it!”

Fam’s headband shattered as she screamed, and the space around her warped and twisted in an expanding sphere. Everyone, except for the girls who had retreated to the far side of the room, was caught up in it. I suddenly felt like I had a terrible headache.

“Ugwah!”

W-Were these the electromagnetic waves of a gremlin’s horn? Had her emotional outburst made them go out of control?

Of course, everyone in the sphere was affected by it. Rosalind was doubled over in pain just like me, but Squallow the cyborg and his android secretary were far worse off. They both had bodies of delicate machinery, and it looked like they'd actually been damaged by the waves. They had fallen to their knees. They were shaking and shuddering with smoke billowing out of parts of their mechanical bodies.

"Uha… ah…"

Krrsh!

Then there was suddenly a loud snapping sound as the ring on the secretary's right hand shattered. As it fell to the floor in countless pieces, I realized that what looked like a ring was actually filled with tiny circuit boards.

Then, Squallow…

"G-Gaah…!"

He was moaning in pain as his body continued to smoke, yet it felt like the light had returned to his eyes. He was trying to turn his head, but it only moved in stuttering fits, so he turned his whole body to face Fam.

"Gwah… F… Fam…"

He finally said her name.

Intermission 3

Planet Berano, several hours after the pirate attack.

The morning sun was rising by the time the Estashionian reinforcements arrived. The vessel they sent was big enough that they had to take over an entire island and remove all the tourist ships before they could dock, but Iris wasn't sure why they would only send one.

"What's wrong, Iris? You don't look happy," Hibiki asked.

The two girls were standing a ways off from the dock as they watched the soldiers unloading relief supplies.

"For starters, I don't like how long it took them to get here… But that's no warship."

"What?"

"It's technically a military vessel, but it's a cargo ship. It wouldn't last ten seconds in a fight."

"I see. Well, it's normal to send supplies for a relief effort, but…"

"It doesn't make sense, does it?"

Even if they were gone now, the planet had been attacked by pirates. Shouldn't they have at least sent an escort ship to defend the supplies and patrol the area once it got there?

"Wait, is that…?"

Iris caught sight of a girl in diplomat's clothes giving orders to the soldiers.

"That's Pleates."

"You know her?"

"There's this technology exchange thing that all Galactic Federation planets participate in. Estashion and Finerita are both major tech powers, so we see each other a lot," Iris explained as she watched Pleates with a small frown. "When Daddy would give speeches, I would sometimes talk to her since we were around the same age… But we weren't exactly friends, you know?"

"Yeah, I get the idea, more or less."

"You sure pick up on things quick, Hibiki. It's easy to talk to you." Iris laughed a bit, then sighed and started to walk forward.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to have a little chat with Pleates. Not that I'm looking forward to it."

"Then I'll go with you."

The two girls started to weave their way through the crowd of soldiers.

"...Hm?" Pleates saw them coming and turned to look in their direction. "Geh! Is that you, Iris?!"

"'Geh'? That's my line, Pleates."

Neither one of them was interested in pleasantries.

"I see you're as bratty as ever."

"Better than being an old lady who's pretending to be younger than she really is."

"Who are you calling old? I'm only in my twenties!"

"Uh-huh. And I'm still in my teens."

"Arrgh!" Pleates screamed.

"Iris, that's enough wasting time..." Hibiki poked Iris in the side.

"Fine, fine. Pleates, why are you so late? Estashion's army should've been here a long time ago."

"That's not your problem, is it?"

"It is my problem. The place where we were staying was attacked."

"So what? Unlike Finerita, where it's so boring that the leader's daughter can go off to other planets to play, Estashion is always busy. A single planet of ours getting attacked by pirates is a small concern. Of course it's going to be low priority."

Hibiki sneered.

"Berano's under your protection, isn't it? This was a genuine emergency, and they needed your help. If you had a reason for being late, that's one thing, but we're talking about people's lives here. That shouldn't be at the bottom of your to-do list."

Pleates ran her fingers along the braid hanging over her shoulder.

"Yes, they are under our protection as long as they don't cause any problems."

"What? That's not what it means to protect something."

"Hmph! You're as stupid as your friend Iris, brat. Planets like these are just cash cows. You milk them for all they're worth, then put them out to pasture. Not that a little brat like you would understand that."

"Tch...!"

"Hold on, Hibiki."

Iris held her hand up to keep Hibiki from jumping on Pleates.

"Pleates, you just told a lie, didn't you?" Iris said with a glare.

"What?!" Pleates's face froze. "Wh-What are you talking about? I'm not lying..."

"I never told you, but when you lie, you always play with your hair."

"What?!"

Pleates only then seemed to realize what she'd been doing. She quickly let go of her braid, but she knew she'd been caught red-handed.

"You did it when you lied about your age the first time we met, when you lied about how big your breasts were, and when you tried to lie about the little gut you were getting."

"She lies about herself that much?" Hibiki asked.

"S-Stop it! Just stop!" Pleates begged, half in tears.

Iris had been talking so loudly that a few of the soldiers were starting to stare.

"Now, if you don't want me to spill some more embarrassing secrets, you'd better tell me exactly what it is you're hiding. If you keep lying to me, you're going to cause a diplomatic incident." Iris stuck out her chest proudly.

Pleates mumbled to herself for a second before reluctantly speaking up.

"...There was a sighting of a dangerous criminal near Estashion. We had to mobilize all our manpower and focus on guarding and screening the immigration control gate."

"What? The whole planet's surrounded by a transparent shield, and the only way in is through that gate. Why did you need the whole military to guard it? Who is this criminal?"

"The rest is classified. I can't tell you."

Iris tilted her head in confusion. Something didn't add up.

What's going on? If the Estashionian army is willing to go all out to stop this guy, it must be some major criminal or a terrorist...

But anybody that the Galactic Federation had a warrant out for would be public knowledge to the entire federation, so it was strange for Pleates to suggest that information on such a criminal was need-to-know.

Pleates is with the Estashionian military, so if she's saying it's classified, then...

The criminal would have to be someone from Estashion, and it probably involved their military secrets. If they were guarding their immigration gate, it sounded more like someone was trying to flee the planet. But if they let some dangerous criminal like that escape, they had a duty to notify the rest of the federation. Either way, Estashion was hiding information.

I can try pressuring her about that, but I don't think she'll tell me any military secrets. The only other blackmail I've got is the poem she wrote and read for me when she got drunk that one time. I could try just reciting it...

But Iris knew she didn't have time to play games. The pirates that attacked Berano, and then the criminal sighted near Estashion... At first glance, the two seemed to have nothing in common, but the timing was too perfect. It was even the criminal's appearance that had caused Estashion to delay sending aid. It certainly didn't seem like a coincidence.

She knew there had to be some connection, but unfortunately, Iris didn't think she was capable of figuring out what it was. Part of it was the lack of information, but another big part was just that she knew she wasn't cut out for that kind of mental heavy lifting.

The best person for the job would probably be... Satsuki, yeah.

Her thoughts turned to her classmate who was still waiting at Ryugu Palace. She didn't like the idea of admitting that Satsuki was smarter than she was, but she knew she couldn't afford to be worried about her ego right now. If her guess was right, Rekka could be in even more danger at the Seageists' base than he thought.

If Rekka's in danger, then I don't have time to sweat the small stuff.

Iris filled Hibiki in and then headed back to Ryugu Palace.

Chapter 4: Who’s Changing What?

The room was quiet. It was in disarray from the fighting, but at least it was over now. Rosalind was keeping a close eye on the incapacitated secretary. Squallow was on his knees, unmoving. Fam was by his side, watching over him with worry in her eyes. Shirley was checking the facility for anything that she might be able to use to repair him. And Rain...

“Rain, are you okay?”

“Yes...” Rain nodded as she slowly approached the motionless Squallow.

She’d come here because she wanted to talk to him, but she was dragging her feet now. She looked like she was afraid to even speak.

“Oh...”

Fam realized that she had something important to say, and after a moment’s hesitation, left Squallow and walked over to me.

All of Squallow’s motor systems had been compromised, and right now he was on his knees, unable to move even a centimeter, I would’ve expected him to fall flat on his face, but he was staying upright, either through pride or sheer force of will.

And slowly but surely, Rain approached the former merman king.

“Lord Squallow, you may know this already, but I am Rain Waterchild, princess of the merfolk and daughter of Muse Waterchild, the queen who banished your people from Berano.”

I watched the two of them carefully. It seemed a safe bet now that the currently incapacitated secretary had been controlling Squallow, but it didn’t change what had happened. Squallow and his people had been exiled from their home planet. You could control someone’s thoughts, or even their actions, but not their feelings. It was possible that he really did hate the mermaids.

“Boss...”

Fam had put on a spare headband and was now standing next to me. She was watching over the two of them the same as I was. She looked worried, so I put my hand on her head.

“The thing that was making your boss act weird is gone now. Now you just have to believe.”

“Shut up! And don’t touch my head!” Fam shouted as she knocked my hand away.

But the same was true for me. All I could do now was believe in Squallow—believe in the person that Fam believed in.

"I hate you… for what you did to my mother."

Squallow said nothing.

"But I know that what my mother, no, what all of us did to you was unforgivable. I hate you, but I also want to atone… What should I do? I want to forgive you, and I want you to forgive me, but what do I do to make that happen? I've been thinking about it ever since I was captured. Please tell me what I should do."

Squallow listened silently as she talked, but soon…

"I'm sorry… about… Muse…"

"Sir Squallow…"

Squallow's words were strained, but he was looking straight at Rain as he apologized.

"I… The others, too… We bear no ill will towards the mermaids… That decision… was one we made… together…"

Rain gasped and quickly raised the sleeve of her kimono to cover her mouth. Her eyes were open as wide as they could possibly be, and her entire body was trembling.

So the expulsion of the mermen was something that both sides decided on together?

"There was no other way… to save Berano… our homeland… our beautiful seas… Even if we die… as long as the sea remains… we will be together again…"

Squallow explained that even after being forced into refugeedom and piracy, their dead were secretly sent back to Muse on Berano, who saw to proper burials for them.

"Then what was in that picture book…" Rain said in a weak voice.

She fell to her knees, still covering her mouth. She cried to herself in silence, unable to say another word.

Even after they'd been exiled from Berano, the mermen still had a connection to the other merfolk. What had Squallow felt when he was forced to kill the queen? What was going through her mind? And most of all, why had the secretary done something like this?

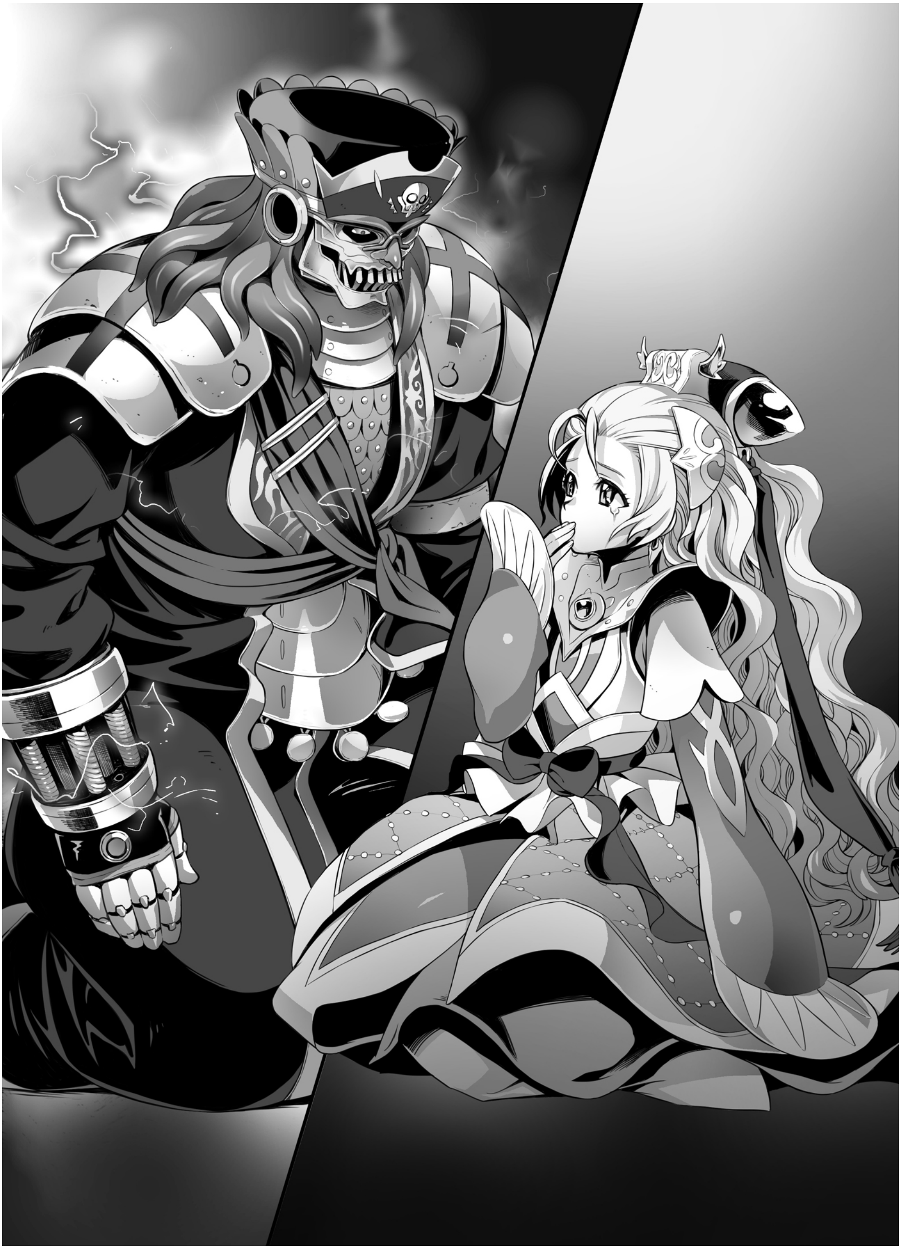
"Squallow, I know you're not doing so great right now, but can you answer some questions for me?" I walked up to his side and asked.

I could see his eyes move, and he looked at me from where he kneeled.

"Yes, boy… I owe you… a debt, as well. I'll answer… any questions I can…."

"Thanks. First, who is that secretary? Why did she make you do this?"

"I'll start… with the second question…. They're after the Mermaid Princess's Tear. That much… I am sure of."



"They?"

As in more than one person? So it wasn't just the secretary?

"That secretary… was brought here a year ago… by the cybernetics engineer."

The one who'd strengthened the Seageists? That's right. Fam said the engineer showed up a year ago, too…

"The engineer said they were giving me an operation… to make my brain more powerful… and implanted a chip in my skull. Ever since then… I've been unable to move of my own free will…"

"A chip?"

"That ring sends… orders to the chip…"

Wait, the ring that Fam's electromagnetic waves destroyed?

"Rosalind, can you pick up that ring for me?"

Maybe it could lead us to the engineer.

"Hmm… This? What is it? It looks like some kind of toy…"

Rosalind seemed confused as she picked up the pieces of the ring. She was probably talking about the ornamentation.

"Oh, I'll help."

Shirley had been standing next to Rosalind, so she bent down to pick up the pieces, too.

"Squallow, is there anything else you remember about the engineer? I could use some kind of clue to help figure out who they were."

"Their name… face… and voice… were probably all false. Thinking back… they were carefully hiding their true nature. I don't know if anything I have… will help you. No… There is one thing…" Squallow took a breath as he paused to remember. "Once… they revealed their true self. We were trying to bring life… to the seas here… We had hundreds of creatures in aquariums… But one of them made the engineer scream…"

"Scream?"

Was there something in the aquarium they didn't like?

"What was inside?"

"A turtle…"

And just as Squallow answered me…

"Garnet, wake up," Shirley commanded.

"Yes, ma'am," the android answered.

"What?!"

What was going on?! Hadn't Fam shut her down?!

Right before my astonished eyes, the secretary jumped on Rosalind and grabbed her arms, but that wasn't enough to stop a vampire.

"Hmph! You'll have to do better than that!" Rosalind laughed.

But…

"Watch out!"

Rosalind had no idea there was another enemy right behind her.

Fwoosh!

A needle shot out from Shirley's medical gun, piercing Rosalind's neck on contact.

"Aah…"

It was enough to stop her dead in her tracks. It was the same Time Stop that Shirley had used to freeze the turtle at Ryugu Palace.

"You let your guard down because you thought that I was no match for you in combat. Well, you were essentially correct, but there's more to fighting than just brute strength."

"Shirley…"

"Yes? Is something the matter, Rekka?"

Shirley stood up, as did her secretary, Garnet. Smoke was still billowing out of the android's body, but she was up and about now.

"Oh, you're wondering how Garnet can still move? That's because I prepared for this. A year ago, when I infiltrated these pirates, that girl…" She pointed at Fam. "I knew that gremlin was always hanging around the captain. I couldn't have all my work being ruined by her electrical interference, so I put a powerful protective coating on Garnet and on the ring, the master chip that controls the captain, as well. It looks like it wasn't quite powerful enough, though."

Shirley kept talking in a light and easy tone like she was just explaining a magic trick. But what she was really saying was…

"Shirley, you were the one behind all this?"

"Yes, that's right."

She'd been the one who infiltrated the Seageists and implanted the chip in Squallow. She'd been the one who made him attack Berano. She'd been the one who was after the Mermaid Princess's Tear.

"…You know, I did think it was a little strange."

"You mean about me?"

"You hated turtles so much, I couldn't help wondering how you managed to make it down to the sea dome when the only way to get there was the turtlebus."

I thought it was strange, but I hadn't given it too much thought. I figured it was just like how people who were afraid of heights or cramped spaces would still get on airplanes to go on vacations. I figured she'd found a way to put up with it for a short while if the payoff was high enough. But it looks like I was wrong.

Shirley laughed.

"You're smarter than you look, Rekka. If you came here aboard the pirate ship, then you know we got in through the undersea ducts, right? I came in the same way just before the others to confirm it was a viable option. I had a helper, you see."

"A helper?"

"That's right... Marle, was it? I took her daughter hostage and threatened her. Of course, she never saw my face. I didn't want her having a change of heart and telling everyone I was with the pirates." Shirley seemed almost proud as she spoke.

"No, Shirley... But why?" Tetra looked like she was about to cry. After thinking Shirley was her friend, she was taking this the hardest.

"Shirley, why did you want the Mermaid Princess's Tear so badly? Why, when it meant hurting so many people?"

"For my ideal world, of course. Remember what I said? I want a world where it's always warm like spring, where your friends are always with you, and where nobody ever hurts anyone else. In order to make that world a reality, I need the Mermaid Princess's Tear."

"That's why you did this?!"

"It's something very important to me. You said you'd help me, didn't you, Rekka?"

"This has to be some kind of joke!"

"It's no joke."

I was yelling, but Shirley was calm. There was a keen glint of light in her eyes behind her glasses.

"I want to be happy, you see."

I was floored.

"There's no one in the world I can trust, so I'm going to win my happiness on my own. I won't let anyone stop me. Not anyone. Now, Garnet...."

"Ye... Mistre..."

"I made Garnet's AI and her body all by myself, so I don't have to be scared when I use her. She's a tool, made for me and me alone. She will never betray me."

Garnet's face was blank. Perfectly expressionless. Her joints were creaking, and she was definitely moving slower than before, but with Rosalind down, I wasn't sure if we could take her.

"You... You..." And then Fam, shaking with rage, turned her right arm into a blade. "You're the ones who did this to the boss!"

"Wait! Fam!"

"I'll make you pay for this!"

Fam readied her blade in a charge like she hadn't heard a word I'd said.

"Garnet!"

"Yes, Mistress Shirley."

Garnet obeyed Shirley's orders and intercepted Fam.

"Damn it!"

I was too slow on the draw, but I whipped out the stungun to try and help her. She was just too fast, and the room wasn't that big. Before I could even level the gun, they were within arm's reach of each other.

"Take this!"

Garnet threw out her arm in front of Fam's blade without the slightest hesitation.

"What?!"

With a clank and a screech, Garnet's arm was split in half by the blade. And just when I thought the blow would cleave the rest of her, too...

"Gwaah!"

Garnet thrust her knee up into Fam's stomach, knocking her to the floor as she coughed up blood.

"Oh, no, Fam!"

I wanted to help her, but once she was down, Garnet came after me.

"Damn it!"

I fired the stungun again. Garnet tried to dodge, but she staggered as her malfunctioning legs gave out from under her. She must've been in even worse shape than she looked. The blast caught her square in the chest. Sparks flew everywhere as it overloaded her android body, and she collapsed in front of me.

Good. Now Shirley should be defenseless...

"Rekka!" Tetra screamed.

I looked up and realized that Shirley was running at me from behind Garnet. I tried to fire the stungun at her, but...

"Garnet! Emergency overload action!"

"....aaaaaAAAAAHH!"

Shirley's order forced Garnet, who was now far past her limits, to her feet again. Her eyes were flashing red like a siren as her roundhouse kick hit me hard in the right arm and knocked the gun out of my hands.

"Gah!"

My elbow...!

The impact from the kick spun me around, and I tumbled to the ground. I honestly thought I'd lost my arm at the elbow, but it seemed like the skin was still attached and keeping it together. I was sure the bone was shattered, though.

"Aah... ugh..."

But Garnet had paid a price, too. I heard the sound of something exploding inside her body, and more smoke billowed out of her as she fell back to the floor. Now it was just me, Shirley, Tetra, Rain, and Squallow.

"Shirley!" Tetra cried.

"You're in the way," Shirley replied coldly.

"Gyah!" Tetra shrieked.

"Tetra... Kyah!" Rain shouted next.

Tetra and Rain tried to stop her, but Shirley knocked them out of the way as she headed for Squallow.

"Grr... nngh..."

Squallow still couldn't move, but he was glaring at Shirley with a deadly look in his eyes.

"Okay! Time for you to be useful again!"

"What are you..."

"Oh, you want to know what I'm doing? Here, I'll show you."

Shirley took out a syringe filled with blue liquid and loaded it into the medical gun, injecting it into Squallow's neck through a gap in his armor.

At first, nothing happened after the injection, but soon Squallow started to moan in pain.

"Ugh...!"

Then there was a popping sound as his shoulder began to swell up.

Flesh. The flesh of his shoulder started to burst up from underneath his armor, pulsating eerily. His chest, his back, his calves, his thighs... His entire body started to change, distorting his silhouette into something strange and twisted.

"What..."

It was so shocking, I couldn't do anything but watch.

"Gaaah!"

A scream escaped Squallow's lips. It lasted for several minutes, but then he fell silent and went back to groaning.

"Guuuuuh..."

His already huge body was now even bigger, but grotesquely transformed in such a way that if you didn't know it was Squallow to begin with, you might think it was a monster. What looked like they were probably his eyes were dull and milky white, and what I thought was his mouth was dripping with drool. There was no sign of sanity left.

"What I just injected him with was an evolution inducer. It changes a person's body depending on their goals. More specifically, this is a failed version of that serum. The reaction was too strong, and it drove even the toughest soldier insane in minutes. The test subjects went on rampages from the pain... That's why I call these things Berserker Cells," Shirley explained, smiling proudly as she stood next to the hideous form of Squallow.

"What the hell? If you use that, you'll also..."

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that. I've got this."

Shirley took out a toy ring that matched the one Garnet had. It was the master chip.

"But... Fam destroyed the chip in Squallow's brain!"

"Rekka, weren't you listening? I'm the one who gave him the operation. Of course I gave him the same anti-gremlin coating I gave Garnet."

Garnet had kept functioning for a while even after being hit with the electromagnetic waves. If Shirley hadn't forced her to overload in order to defeat me and Fam, she might still be operational even now. But wait, if Squallow had that protective coating, too...

"The reason Squallow can't move right now is because I'm freezing him with the master chip. Unfortunately, it looks like the other half of it was destroyed, so I wasn't able to stop him from talking, but this half is still more than enough to control his body. I'm sure glad the gremlin's power didn't quite reach me," Shirley said with a deliberate sigh of relief.

"Then... I can just destroy it again..."

Fam was barely able to move, but she used the last of her strength to try and take off her headband.

"Oh, now that would be a problem."

"Guuuuuh..."

Instantly, Squallow's left arm shot out like a spear and impaled Fam's stomach.

"Gah..."

"Fam!"

Blood fell from her mouth like a waterfall. It was... so much blood...

Squallow's arm, now stained red, retracted from her abdomen and began to shrink. But even when it did, it couldn't quite go back to its original size, so now his left and right arms were different lengths.

"I aimed for the head. I guess it isn't quite as accurate as it needs to be."

"Shirley!"

"Don't scream. She loved her captain. I'm sure she's happy he would be the one to take her life."

Shirley clapped her hands together.

"Surely now you understand that you can't win, right? I'm about to ask you a question. If you don't want to die, then just answer 'yes' or 'no.'"

Shirley looked at me, Tetra, and Rain in turn.

"I'm going to make my ideal world now. If any of you want to join, then I'll take you. In exchange for implanting a chip in your head, that is."

"Why are you asking something like that?"

"You don't get to ask any questions. Now answer me."

She was right. There was no way we could win right now. I didn't have any cards up my sleeve. If I just did what she wanted, I could survive. But then she'd implant a chip in me, and I'd spend the rest of my days as her doll. The answer was obvious.

"I refuse!"

"Absolutely not!"

"No!"

And we all felt the same way.

"..."

For just a moment, Shirley looked disappointed. And then...

"Kill them."

She gave Squallow the order to attack.

"Guuuuuh..."

Squallow's twisted arm lashed out like a whip, knocking Tetra and Rain backwards.

"Tetra! Rain!"

They both slammed into the wall and slumped to the floor, no longer moving.

Damn it! Who cares if I'm practically missing an arm? My legs are still working. My mind is still working. Am I just going to lie here on the floor?!

"Damn...!"

My legs were stiff and flailing, but I managed to get to my feet. I glared at Shirley.

"Shirley..."

I took a step towards her, and then another. But before I could get close...

"Squallow."

Squallow's arm shot out towards me like it had with Fam.

"Gah!"

My insides were... torn apart...

The strength left my knees, and I fell to the ground. I almost passed out from the pain. Actually, I think I did pass out. The pain just brought me back. My vision flashed black and white, eventually settling on a weak dimness. I could hear my own breathing in the distance. I could feel someone standing next to me as my mind faded away.

"You're still alive, huh?"

It was Shirley's voice. I could feel her breath on my ears.

"If you nod, I'll save you."

"...No!"

"I see. You're a fool, aren't you?"

I heard what sounded like a small sigh.

"I'm going to change the world all by myself… Let's go, Squallow."

"Guuuuuh…"

There was a sound like something large slowly dragging itself across the floor, and then they were gone, or at least I couldn't sense them. But that was generous. Really, all of my senses were fading.

Jeez… This is the second time I've almost died like this, huh?

There didn't seem to be an open hole in my stomach, but I could tell that my insides were a mess. I didn't know how long I'd blacked out, but things were starting to look really grim for me. Last time, Satsuki and the others had come to save me, but I probably wouldn't get that lucky again.

Tetra, Rain, Fam… I'm sorry.

If only somebody could break the Time Stop on Rosalind. Oh, but then there was…

"R… R…"

"I'm right here. Is something the matter?"

Really, she never changes…

"Sorry… that I couldn't change the future. But hey… I guess if I die, the War of All never happens… right?"

"It will likely be avoided, according to the predictions of those who sent me here."

"I see… At least… there's that…"

I hope it works out, because I'm starting to…

"But I have to say, Rekka, you're acting as if you're at death's door."

"…Huh?"

Yeah, well, I don't know what it looks like to you, but I'm definitely going to die here…

"Oh, can you maybe not see?" R said as if she was just realizing that now. "Well, he's definitely going to save the girls first. And he's doing some sort of 'prince awakening Sleeping Beauty' thing, too… You should just pray he gets to you in time, Rekka."

What was she talking about? Was… someone there? Whoever he was, he was saving the girls—Tetra, Rain, Fam, and Rosalind—first. That was just fine, but I was really hoping I didn't slip away during his Sleeping Beauty and the prince routine…

But my prayers went unheard, and my life ended at a young age… Or, at least, that's what I was on the verge of by the time my "help" finally arrived.

"Man, look at you. I'm really not into gore, you know…"

"Stop being stupid, and save Rekka!" I heard Tetra yell.

The man shoved something warm inside my mouth.

"Here, swallow this down. Otherwise you'll die, you hear?"

I used my tongue to gulp it down, just like he'd said. Instantly, the pain vanished, and my stomach was back to normal. Even my nearly severed right arm had healed itself.

"...Raul."

The first thing I saw when my vision came back was the thief who'd gone to get us an escape craft. Tetra, Rain, Fam, and even the now unfrozen Rosalind were all looking at me with worried expressions. Raul was the only one with an easygoing look on his face. He laughed.

"Good thing you didn't die, huh? Oh, and since I'm the one who saved you all, I think you pretty ladies should give me one personal possession eac—bwargh!"

I punched him.

"Oww! What the hell was that for? I just saved you!"

"Thanks for that, but I think I'm going to punch you again!"

"What?! Then I'll show no mercy, either! Baron Punch!"

Wow! He saved my life, but I felt more angry than grateful! How often do you get to see that? Raul and I knocked each other around for a while, and when we both ran out of energy, we sat down on the floor.

"...So, how did you manage to save us? We were all seriously wounded, me especially."

"Rekka, do you believe in fantasy?"

"I've lived it, actually."

"Hahaha! That sounds like a fun life."

It's not an easy one, though.

Raul laughed for a moment, and then the corners of his mouth rose up in a nihilistic smile.

"You ever hear the myth that eating the flesh of an immortal grants you immortality, too?" he said.

"...Are you implying that you're immortal, and you just fed us some of your flesh?"

"Bingo!"

"...I won't ask where from."

"Surprised?"

"Sure, I guess, but..."

Come to think of it, he'd been a phantom thief for 500 years and his wound on Berano had healed instantly. There was a lot of weird stuff going on with this guy. Still, immortal? Wait a second...

"Hang on, if I just ate your flesh, does that make me immortal now, too?"

"Hmm... Haha! No, don't worry. Think about what would happen if that were true. You'd have immortals everywhere. The whole universe would instantly be full of them!" Raul slapped his knees as he laughed. "Well, I suppose it's not totally wrong, but it is an exaggeration. If you ingest the flesh of an immortal, your body temporarily gains the power to return to its original, healthy form. You can see how anyone who made a miraculous recovery that way might think that they'd become immortal, right?"

Your body returning to its original, healthy form, huh? That would explain how my arm had healed itself after almost being sheared off.

"So is that what happened to my arm?" Fam asked.

"Huh? Fam, your arm..."

When she said something, I realized that Fam's cyborg arm had turned back to a normal girl's arm. I mean, sure, a cyborg arm certainly wasn't her "original" form, but was this stuff really that powerful?

"That's crazy..."

"I guess so," Raul laughed.

I was used to seeing crazy things—or at least, I thought I was—but I guess I still had a lot to learn.

But regardless, I was alive now. I thanked Raul once more, and then got down to business. Raul didn't know what was going on, so I explained the situation.

"Do you know where Shirley went?"

"I passed her on my way to meet up with you. But when I saw what happened to Squallow, I hid before they spotted me. She wasn't looking like her usual self, either."

After watching her go, Raul had decided to come find us next. It was clear to him that we'd been defeated, and as long as we weren't dead, he knew he could help.

"So, yeah, that's why I had to give up on following her. But I can guess where she is."

"Try me."

"That new warship Fam was talking about? By the time I got into the dock, it was already complete. The whole construction schedule was probably set up so it would finish today."

In other words, Shirley had gotten on the spaceship and left.

"Damn it! Then there's no way to know where they went..."

I pounded the floor in frustration. Raul gave an exasperated shrug.

"Don't tell me you're thinking about chasing her."

"Of course I am. I haven't saved Squallow or Shirley, and I haven't gotten the Mermaid Princess's Tear back."

I hadn't saved a single story yet. I couldn't give up here.

"Aww, damn it... Fine! Kid, let me tell you something."

"What?"

"You don't need to get the Mermaid Princess's Tear back."

"Huh? Why...?"

"The jewel the pirates stole from Ryugu Palace was a fake. I swapped out the real thing before they even got there."

"...Huh?"

What the heck was he talking about?

"But the Mermaid Princess's Tear is a pretty azure jewel, right? Squallow definitely had it. Rain saw it, too."

"Yes, I'm certain that was the Tear..." Rain agreed.

"I chose something that looked similar enough that you wouldn't be able to tell the difference."

"But how could you prepare such a detailed fake? Only the clan of the mermaid princess and the king of the mermen are supposed to know about it. How did you even know what it looked like?" Rain didn't seem convinced.

How he'd known what it looked like was a good question, but better yet...

"Why would you do that in the first place?"

He was a thief, so I could understand stealing it. But why he'd bother swapping it out with a fake was beyond me. It sounded like Raul was trying to trick the pirates.

"I just told you that I'm immortal, right?"

"Yeah."

"A long, long time ago, I was the one who gave the original mermaid princess the Tear."

"What?!" we all screamed in unison.

"Th-Then you're the god in the legend, Raul?" Rain asked.

"Aww, don't call me a god. It makes me feel silly. Old stories always get blown out of proportion down the line. The Mermaid Princess's Tear once had a much more boring name, too, you see. It was called the Weatherstone." Raul waved his hand dismissively and shied away from Rain's gaze.

"Hmm, so what are you saying? In order to protect the present you once gave an old flame, you beat the pirates to it and swapped it out for a fake, then stayed on Berano until they attacked?"

The rest of us were too stunned to react, but not Rosalind.

"She was nothing like that," Raul chuckled. "But she was quite the looker, I'll have you know. At first, I'll admit there were ulterior motives. But really, she had a pretty heart... Very different than somebody like me. And, eventually, I started to think I wanted to protect that pretty heart of hers."

Raul's eyes narrowed, and he looked at the floor. Was he remembering something from his past?

"...I wanted to protect the planet she loved. That was all."

"And that's why you swapped out the real one for a fake?"

"That's right. Berano's royalty has kept the secret of the Mermaid Princess's Tear for generations. But there are always people trying to find out secrets like that, so I took the extra step of spreading the rumor that it was just a valuable jewel."

Right. That way, even if someone did come to steal it, they'd just be looking for a jewel and not something more.

"Somebody who was just after a jewel could be easily conned with a fake. So when I heard that the Seageists were after the Tear, I quickly snuck into Ryugu Palace. I left a different valuable jewel in its place so they'd steal that instead. Then I could just return the original afterward."

And that's why Raul had been waiting for everything to finish playing out in Ryugu Palace City.

"Of course, I very discreetly passed the news on to Queen Muse that the Seageists were coming. But she didn't do anything to prepare... Well, since the Seageists' boss is the former merman king, she probably didn't even believe me."

But she didn't know that Squallow was under someone else's control... and that's why...

"So, where's the real Tear?" I asked.

"The real tear is," Raul pointed at me and said, "inside your stomach."

"Huh?! Wait! How?!"

It'd been a day full of surprises, but this was the biggest one yet.

"The first time we met, by which I mean the time you gave me that nasty lariat, remember how you thought you'd swallowed something?"

Huh, yeah... That's right. I thought it was Shirley's ring, but it turned out to be a small pebble or something. Wait, don't tell me...

"The Mermaid Princess's Tear flew out of my pocket, and you swallowed it."

"What was it doing in your pocket?! Take better care of your stuff!"

"You can't honestly expect me to be prepared to take a lariat like that on the street."

"It was your fault for dine-and-dashing!"

"Even immortals get hungry, you know."

Raul and I yelled at each other for a while, but it was such a waste of time that I gave up.

"I guess that explains some things, though," I said. "Like what you were doing in my room, or why you showed up in the canal, or why you followed us here."

He'd been trying to keep an eye on the Mermaid Princess's Tear.

He couldn't just come out and say that something so important—especially not something he stole—was inside my stomach. If I was a bad guy, I might misuse it. And he probably hadn't tried to take it by force because Rosalind was with me.

"Well, that's about the size of it. The Mermaid Princess's Tear is right here, so there's no need to go chasing after Squallow," Raul said, trying to bring the discussion to a close.

But...

"No, I still haven't saved anybody. So I'm going."

Raul frowned.

"Man, you really don't get it, do you? If it weren't for me, you would be dead right now! So why are you trying to chase her again? You don't even know where she went..."

But before he could continue yelling at me...

"No, we still have a clue," Rosalind said, interrupting him.

She was staring at Garnet, who was still lying on the ground.

"She left her behind, huh?"

Bad guy or not, it was still horrible of Shirley to just leave her like that...

"Hey, if you're not broken, answer us," Rosalind demanded.

"Pi... ga..."

"Hmph. She's still partially operational. Rekka, that's your cue."

Rosalind moved aside so that I could talk to her. Garnet still couldn't move, so I lifted her up and leaned her against the wall. Then I got down on my knees next to her and thought for a moment about what I wanted to say.

All the bloodline of the Namidare did was give me a chance to bring a story to a happy ending. Shirley's story was an attempt to create "an ideal world." Not just any ideal world, but hers. She wanted to be happy. That was a normal wish. One that everybody had. But how Shirley was trying to achieve it was wrong. That much I was sure of. So my question for Garnet was...

"Garnet, tell me. Why did Shirley decide to create an ideal world?"

"Rekka, shouldn't you ask where she went?" Rosalind interrupted in a slightly stern voice.

"We have to stop Shirley, but just beating her up won't solve anything. It was the same with you, wasn't it, Rosalind?"

"..."

I hadn't solved Rosalind's story just by beating her in combat. I'd had to learn about her past, her motives, and the beginning of her story. That was how I was eventually able to get through to her.

"I want to save Shirley's story. It's normal to want to be happy, but the way she's acting... If she's that desperate to be happy, it must mean she's been through something really horrible. She wouldn't have to go to such lengths otherwise."

Shirley's smile last night when we were playing was genuine. I couldn't imagine a truly cold-blooded person smiling like that. That's how I knew there had to be something in her past… Something that had driven her to this.

Garnet's head turned upward to look at me with a creaking sound. She stared straight at me with mechanical eyes.

"…You're going to save Shirley?"

"Yeah."

"…You're the first person who's ever said they'd do anything for her." Garnet's mouth was still moving awkwardly, but her voice sounded relieved. "Shirley is a genius created by the pinnacle of genetic technology. She's been training in all of Estashion's technology since the day she was born, and she started working with the adults at the head of the government at a young age."

"A created genius?"

So like an even more amazing version of mixing the genes of talented men and women?

"No friends."

"No time to play."

I recalled the things Shirley had said at the hotel and gritted my teeth. If she'd really spent her whole life in an environment like that, then she couldn't help feeling that way, could she?

"At first, I was just a little doll with a learning-enabled AI implanted in me. Shirley always looked so sad when she played with me… Eventually she moved my AI to another body and upgraded me over and over until I could help her with her work. Work was all she cared about. It felt like she was working so much so she wouldn't have to think about anything else."

So she was trying to drown her loneliness in work?

"But just over a year ago… something happened."

"What?"

"Shirley has been working on a certain project for three years." Garnet kept talking, unblinking. "The chip that was implanted in Squallow's brain was originally the type given to all Estashionian citizens at the age of ten as an initiation into adulthood. It enhances a person's mental capacities."

"I remember hearing something about that," Raul said.

"The name of that chip was the Peacemaker Device, and it was part of a project that was attempting to use them to eliminate crime and dangerous ideologies. On occasion, it was also used to bring the will of the people together."

Get rid of crime and dangerous ideologies? That sounded nice on the surface, but it was really no different than using the master chip to control someone, was it? And this was on a much larger scale.

“The people weren’t opposed to a mind control project like that?”

“That’s why the project was carried out in secret. But just a little over a year ago, the details became public. The backlash was overwhelming. The people came very close to obliterating their own government.”

That made sense. It was hard to imagine who wouldn’t be mad after finding out about something like that. I know I would be. But what did this have to do with Shirley’s story?

“So what happened then?”

I motioned for her to continue, and Garnet—even though she was an android—looked like she was about to cry.

“The Estashionian government put all the blame on Shirley, the project head, and tried to have her executed.”

“Executed?!”

“...So, Shirley was betrayed?” Tetra bit her lip and put her hand up to her chest as if to quell the pain inside.

She’d spent her whole life without making friends or having fun, only to end up being used like a scapegoat...

“Hmph...”

Rosalind didn’t say anything, but I could tell that she was displeased. Maybe she was thinking of Suzuran back when she was still Silver Slayer, a homunculus created only to kill her. There was certainly a similarity between the two of them. Shirley’d even been betrayed. It wouldn’t be right to compare which of them was worse off, but...

“Shirley took me and fled from the government.”

But before she left the planet, she’d had Garnet remove her chip. The government could track her with it, so she knew she had to get rid of it in order to get away.

“So that’s what happened to Shirley...”

“Yes.”

“I understand.”

I nodded, but before I could stand up, I heard a voices in the hall as pirates swarmed into the room. They were all badly injured and their clothes were in tatters.

“Fam! What the heck is going on here?!” one of them asked.

“What happened to you all? You’re bleeding!” Fam replied.

“Some weird woman showed up with a monster and stole our new ship! Some of the others went with her. We don’t now what’s going on...”

According to what they said, the woman—probably Shirley—had taken a few of the pirates with her, including some of their lieutenants. Those who tried to stop them were attacked without mercy. Shirley hadn't only done her surgery on Squallow. She'd probably implanted this "chip" in some of the other crewmembers, as well.

"Fam, do we have a ship that can chase her?" I helped Garnet to her feet as I talked. She still seemed barely aware of what was going on around her. "The faster the better, even. Something that can catch up to the new ship's warp speed... Like the one in the docks right now."

"...And you want me to get everybody to help you? To save that woman..." Fam spat out those words with a bitter expression on her face.

"I won't deny it. I want to help Shirley. But I want to help Squallow, too."

"..."

"Fam, your story can't have a happy ending without Squallow and the Seageists, right? I'll help you. So help me, too."

Fam didn't answer right away. She looked down a little and thought about it.

"Fam, what is he talking about? Who are these guys?" one of the pirates asked.

"Everyone..." Fam said as she looked up. "We're going to save the boss."

"Wait, you can't mean..."

"You can ask questions later! Get the ship moving first! Everybody in the family owes the boss a debt, and now's the time to repay it! Now it's our turn to save him!"

For a moment, the pirates fell silent. But seeing how serious she was, they all ran out of the room with determination in their eyes.

"We're going, too. Don't fall behind," Fam said as she looked over her shoulder before running after the pirates.

"Yeah. Garnet, you can tell us the rest on the way."

I offered Garnet my shoulder as I went to follow Fam.

"Wait."

But Raul stepped in front of me.

"You're not done talking with me. You've got the Mermaid Princess's Tear in your stomach. I can't let you anywhere near Shirley."

Raul was looking at me with a stern expression. I could understand why he wouldn't want the Mermaid Princess's Tear anywhere Shirley could get her hands on it. But...

"You understand, don't you, Raul? Your whole plan depends on her thinking that she had the real Tear. But once she realizes that she doesn't, Shirley's going to attack Berano again."

"..."

The tear was necessary for keeping Berano's climate stable, but it wouldn't make a difference with no one left to enjoy it. Until the problem with Shirley was solved, Berano wouldn't be safe.

"If it's really that important to you, then you can do surgery on me or something to take it out."

With Raul's power, any wounds from the surgery could be healed instantly.

"But there's no time, so do it while we're on the ship on the way out of here. We might need to go into warp to catch her, but once we leave warp, you can take an escape pod and leave on your own."

"...I still don't get it. I mean, that works for me, but I still don't get it. Shirley tried to kill you. Why are you going after her?'

"The reason's simple," I said.

"And what's that?"

"Because that's the normal thing to do." The corners of my mouth turned up ever so slightly. "If a friend of mine gets kidnapped, I want to save them. If a child is crying, I want to help them. And if my friend is doing something wrong, I want to stop them, even if I have to punch them to snap them out of it. That's all there is to it."

That was how I decided to live my life the day I found out about my bloodline.

"Raul, everyone... what will you do?"

"Hmph. I'm going with you, of course. Do you even have to ask?" Rosalind was the first to respond.

"I want to stop Shirley, too," Tetra said. She formed her hands into tiny fists in front of her chest and nodded. "I don't want her to do any more awful things."

"...Me, too," Rain said in a strong voice through lips tightly pursed in determination.

"Come on now. Rain, you're not that strong. What will you do if you follow the boy? It's dangerous!" Raul quickly stood in her way and tried to persuade her to give up.

"Raul..."

But the purity in her eyes made him look away.

"You have watched over Berano and the merfolk for centuries, and on behalf of my clan, I thank you. But for now, please don't try to stop me."

"But I made a promise to her. I promised I'd protect Berano! I can't let you go anywhere you'll be in danger."

"Raul..." Rain said softly.

She then closed her eyes and paused for a moment. When she looked up at Raul once more, the look in her eyes was even more resolute than before.

“Did the purehearted princess you loved ask you only to protect the merfolk and not the mermen?”

Raul’s eyes went wide.

“I’m going to save Squallow. And I’m going to change the world so he can come back home,” Rain said. “My mother and Squallow protected my world, and now I will change it to bring us into the future. Just like I promised my mother when I was little, I will grant the wish of the red fish prince and the blue fish princess.”

Raul frowned for a moment before finally putting a hand to his forehead and muttering that he’d given up.

“In the end, I’m just a wimp who sees only what he wants to see. When I look into eyes like yours, Rain, I realize how small I really am.”

Raul chuckled and slapped his hands against his cheeks. In an instant, he was back to his usual easygoing expression.

“I’ll follow you anywhere. If there’s anything I can do to help, just ask.”

“Will do,” I said as I nodded.

Now that everyone was on the same page, I headed for the spaceport, half-carrying Garnet along the way. Fam gave us a ride in some kind of vehicle that hovered above the ground, so we were all at the ship and ready to go in no time.

“Take off!”

With a shout, the ship’s floor rattled, and the scenery outside began to descend beneath us. Soon we couldn’t even see the mountains anymore. Just the sky above. We’d be in space shortly.

“All right, it’s time to hear the rest of what Garnet has to say. We need to know where we’re going, so tell us that first.”

“All right. Shirley is...”

Suddenly, my pocket started to vibrate. It was my cell phone. I knew Iris would be on the other end.

Intermission 4

"Rekka, big trouble! Shirley is..."

As soon as he picked up the phone, Iris tried to tell Rekka all she'd learned from Satsuki's magic, but she was in such a hurry that it came out as a jumbled mess.

"Calm down, Iris. I already know most of this."

"...Right."

Just hearing Rekka's voice made her feel better. Slightly calmer now, Iris turned the volume up to maximum and put the phone on the desk in the room. The other girls gathered around as they all exchanged what they'd learned.

"Then it was the Estashionian government that betrayed Shirley first, wasn't it?"

Iris felt angry when she heard what Rekka told them. All she'd asked Satsuki was who the Estashionian government was so scared of. She'd learned that it was Shirley, but she didn't know about Shirley's past. Once she found out Rekka was in danger, she'd wanted to get in touch with him before anything else.

"Shirley is heading towards Estashion right now."

"Huh? But why...?"

"Before she left Estashion, Shirley stole the plans for the Peacemaker Device. She used that to make something she's calling the master chip. And that's not all," Rekka said. "Shirley had the Seageists gather up enough money to build a new pirate ship. One that's equipped with a device that amplifies the power of the master chip."

"But then...!"

Everyone over the age of ten on Estashion was implanted with those chips. Which meant...

"She's going to kill all the adults who made her suffer."

The whole group fell silent.

"And then she's going to make the remaining children choose. Obey her, or suffer the consequences. If they obey, they'll be implanted with chips, too, and if they don't, she'll have Squallow and the other pirates kill them."

"B-But the Estashionian army is really strong, right? And they're guarding the gate into the planet. A single pirate ship couldn't..."

"Remember what I just said? Shirley can use her master chip amplifier to take control of all of Estashion. As soon as she gets close to them, their warships will be helpless. She can walk right through that gate."

"But that's horrible!" Iris screamed.

Harissa and Tsumiki were panicking, too. Satsuki, Hibiki, and Suzuran were silent. They were all trying to think of something. Anything.

"Iris, everyone... I need your help."

"Wh-What is it?"

"Shirley's heading for the central energy storage facility on Estashion."

As long as she had the master chip amplifier, she had the power of a god on that planet. But no matter how powerful her device was or how strong her ship was, she wouldn't be able to keep them running without energy. And the central energy storage facility had exactly what she needed—it was the power source for the entire planet.

"The new ship was built to dock with that facility. She plans on draining its power."

"Then if we can stop her..." Harissa wondered out loud.

"To be honest, I don't think it'll be easy to stop her. But until she has a source of power, she's probably going to keep the amplifier's output to a minimum. She probably won't do more than make them open the gate or stop any warships from firing at her."

She wouldn't kill anyone until she had her power source.

"I understand. So, what do you want us to do?" Hibiki asked Rekka.

"It's going to take about an hour and a half for her ship to reach Estashion. It's going to take us two. But if you guys can warp from Berano in an Estashionian warship, you can get there before anyone else."

Everyone gasped.

The Estashionian army had only taken so long to reach Berano because they'd left several hours late, but normally the trip would take less than an hour.

"Try to find some way to persuade the Estashionian army and get there before Shirley does. The energy storage facility is just a relay point. It gathers energy from generators all over the planet and distributes it out to where it needs to go from there. If you can cut the links between it and the other facilities, you can slow Shirley's plan down a good deal."

"We can't just destroy the generators?"

"There's a lot of them, and they're mostly underground. Not to mention they're supposed to be built to stand up to terrorist attacks and natural disasters. There's not enough time to take care of that, and it would be harder to persuade the Estashionians to go through with it."

"I see..."

Hibiki was now satisfied and looked at Iris. If anyone was going to persuade the Estashionian army, it would have to be her. Iris clenched her fists when she realized why Hibiki was looking at her.

"Leave it to me, Rekka! I'll take care of it!" she said in a loud, cheerful voice.

"Thanks. We'll be heading into warp any minute now. We won't be able to contact you during that time, so don't do anything crazy. As long as you can buy us time, we'll make sure it works out."

"...You're the one who always does the crazy stuff," Tsumiki retorted.

Everyone laughed a little, but then got right to work.

▽

The new ship the Seageists had created had no name. To Shirley, it was just a disposable vessel meant to carry the master chip amplifier to Estashion and take over the energy storage facility. She had no special attachment to it.

Shirley's expression was cold as she stood on the bridge surrounded by the enslaved pirates. She'd changed from her tourist outfit into her usual white lab coat and let down her hair. There was a very different air about her now than when she'd been with Rekka.

Finally... I'll finally get what I want.

At no point in her life had Shirley ever really gotten what she'd wanted. She'd just gone along with the flow, doing the work she was given in the environment she was placed in. And after all that, she was betrayed in the end and left with nothing. So this time, she would find her own happiness. This plan was her way of getting back what she hadn't been allowed to have... and what had been taken from her.

The defensive barrier around Estashion uses new technology that not even the rest of the Galactic Federation has their hands on. Once that gate is shut, very few nations will be able to break through. Estashion's main export has always been technology, and I have lots of new technologies that no one else knows about yet. If I use that as bait to negotiate...

Shirley's lips curled up into a cold smile as she thought about what she'd do once Estashion was hers. Adults were filthy cheaters. Even if Shirley committed mass murder, they wouldn't care as long as they could benefit from it. Someone might try to attack her under the auspices of "freeing Estashion," but her planetary barrier would be impenetrable, and she'd have plenty of disposable soldiers who didn't fear death.

I'll need to leave some soldiers alive until things settle down with the rest of the federation, won't I? I hate the idea of leaving any of those adults *alive, though…*

But it wouldn't be for long. Shirley was already working on a combination of cloning and genetic engineering that would mass-produce soldiers for her. She could just take the combat abilities of the adults she didn't kill and put them into the brains and bodies of the clones, then use the chips to control them. She'd have her own personal army.

A year… No, I can do it in half a year.

She wanted to be rid of those adults as soon as possible. She wanted everything impure removed from her ideal world.

"Exiting warp," the synthesized voice of the ship's AI said.

Shirley looked up and saw Estashion—the place she hated, but the place that would soon be her ideal world—appear in front of her.

"I knew there'd be warships. Not that it will help them…"

Shirley activated the amplifier and sent a simple order from her ring to the warships: "move." The warships halted with their guns frozen pointed towards her, but after about 30 seconds, they parted formation and began to move aside.

"The reception is nice and clear," she commented.

Satisfied with the success of the amplifier, Shirley then forced workers to open the immigration gate. She then entered the planet's barrier and headed straight for the energy storage facility.

At this point, the government must have realized that something was wrong because someone tried to shoot her down from afar. Shirley protected herself by using the warships she'd just enslaved as a shield. Things were going just fine so far, but when she got close enough to see the facility, she realized something was strange.

"…A cargo ship? What's it doing in a place like this?"

Did they realize I'm after the energy storage facility? No, even if they did, why put a cargo ship here? It can't shoot me down…

Or was it loaded with explosives? If she attacked it, would it blow up and maybe take out the facility with it? Shirley's mind began to race, but she was worried for nothing. When her warships approached, the cargo ship fled like a rat.

"What was that…?'

Was it just a random ship headed for the facility that had happened to be anchored in mid-air? She still didn't know, but either way, the nuisance was gone.

Shirley docked her ship in the facility as she'd originally planed. The pirates could take care of the rest. She called up the display on the main bridge and used it to reroute all the power flowing into the facility to the master chip amplifier.

"This is it. The end…"

She touched the "execute" command on the display. That was supposed to be the end.

"...?"

But no power came.

Shirley looked at the display again to try and determine the cause.

...All power from the generators has been physically cut off?

For a split second, she was impressed. Destroying any part of the facility would mean a considerable loss. And adults hated to do anything that meant losing something, even if it was necessary. They would always waste time asking themselves if there was some other way, or even trying to figure out if someone else could take the loss instead. At least, that was how the Estashionian government had always functioned.

"I guess we do this the hard way. Come with me, Squallow."

"Guuuuuh..."

Shirley spun around, the hem of her lab coat flying up in the air, and walked towards the lower decks with Squallow following behind her. She'd considered the odds of something like this happening very low, but that didn't mean she didn't have a plan for it. This is what she'd brought the Berserker Cells for—not to defeat Rekka, the boy she'd run into by chance on the streets of Ryugu Palace City.

Rekka...

The name tore at her heart. Why had he come to save her? Why had he taken all those risks? And even if he was willing to put himself in danger like that, why not just save Tetra? There was no reason for him to save her or Rain, girls he'd known for less than a day. Nothing Rekka did made any sense to her.

The only things in this world she could trust were herself and her creations. Nothing else. That's why she would create a new world. One she could believe in. One she made by her own hands. One where no one would betray her. And for that, she didn't care how many people she had to hurt.

▽

Iris and the others were in the main computer room at the central energy storage facility. There was a collective sigh of relief in the room.

"She took over the computer network the instant she docked, didn't she? See? Wasn't I right about cutting those cables?"

"Do you know how much one of those cables costs? I brought you here because you said you weren't going to destroy anything! This is going to be my fault, isn't it?"

"Yeah, those were some thick cables. Hard, too. The energy loss during transport must be pretty low, right? Why not bring them to the next technology exchange?" Iris laughed thinking of the cables in the basement that they'd just ripped apart.

"Don't try and change the subject!" Pleates, the girl she was bickering with, was literally in tears.

Pleates hadn't wanted to bring them here, but after being threatened with everything from personal blackmail to leaking top-level classified info (courtesy of the Magic of Omniscience), she'd had no choice but to submit.

20

To tell the truth, Iris did feel a little bad for her. But this was an emergency. Really, she was saving the planet, so surely the Estashionian government would forgive her. But Iris made a mental note to introduce Pleates to her father later anyway… just in case they didn't.

Their conversation, however, was interrupted by a violent shaking that rocked the whole facility.

"What? Did they attack us?" Satsuki asked.

"Maybe, but why?" Hibiki asked in turn.

Shirley's goal was to take over the storage facility, not destroy it. But the rumbling continued.

"Kyah!"

"Harissa!"

Tsumiki grabbed Harissa before she could fall over, but…

"Wait! Kyah!"

The floor shook again, and she lost her balance.

"Are you okay?"

Suzuran grabbed them both and sat them on the floor.

"Th-Thanks."

"Thank you."

"It was nothing. But I don't understand what they're doing. Why…"

Suzuran looked up at the ceiling of the main computer room just as it collapsed.

"Watch out!" Iris yelled as she leaped to protect the closest person from the falling debris, but…

"…?"

Nothing fell down.

Iris looked up at the ceiling, wondering what was going on.

"…What is that? Is it alive?"

"It merged with the ceiling… No, the facility itself?"

Pale flesh studded with red blood vessels had appeared and fused with the shattered ceiling. It was like watching one creature devour another. The flesh greedily ate at the ceiling, the monitors, the control boards—everything it touched.

But it passed right by the girls. All it absorbed was the facility itself. Harissa touched one of the fleshy tentacles, but even when she shrieked, it just passed by.

"Merging…? Unifying… the facility? Not good!"

Hibiki seemed to realize something and tried to race out of the room, but the doors had been absorbed already. She couldn't open them.

"Damn it! Iris, help me break this door!"

"Huh? What? Hibiki, what's going on?"

"It's probably trying to merge with the entire building. When she took over the computer systems, she wasn't able to get the energy because we'd physically cut the cables. But if this thing gets to the basement and fuses the severed cables...!"

Hibiki didn't get a chance to finish her sentence. She was interrupted by the awful sound of ripping flesh. It was coming from Pleates.

"Agyahh...!"

She was tearing into her own neck with her exquisitely decorated nails like she was trying to rip it open.

"Agh! Aah! Aah!"

"Stop her!"

Iris quickly grabbed Pleates by the wrists to stop her from hurting herself. But then she started to bang her head against the walls and floors, sending blood everywhere.

"What's going on?!" someone screamed.

"Tch!"

Hibiki took off her jacket, tore part of it off, and shoved it into Pleates's mouth so she couldn't bite her own tongue off. She then used the rest of the jacket to bind her wrists.

"It's the amplifier."

"What?"

"Remember what Rekka said? Shirley can use the master chip to control anybody who has a chip in their brain... This is how she intends to get her revenge on the grown-ups of this planet."

And based on Pleates's condition, she'd been restricted from using most of her strength. She was being toyed with so that her death would be as slow and painful as possible.

"Isn't there something we can do?!"

Hibiki fell silent.

Harissa and Satsuki saw to patching up Pleates's wounds, but what happened to her was probably happening all over Estashion.

Iris took out her phone. It was a special model that could connect to Rekka no matter where in the universe he was. But it wasn't working right now.

"Why...?"

She realized it immediately. He still hadn't left warp. He was still on his way to Estashion.

Iris tried again. It still didn't work.

"Answer the phone..."

Again. She heard meaningless static.

"Answer... Rekka..."

Again. Still nothing. And then again...

“Answer… Answer me… Please, Rekka!”

Boop!

“Hey, I made it.”

“Rekka…” She said the name of the boy on the other end of the phone, her voice filled with tears. “Rekka… Rekka… Rekka! Help us!”

“I’m on it!”

Chapter 5: You Can't Change the World Alone

"Full speed ahead, men!"

The pirates' cries echoed throughout the main bridge. The ship raced through the open gate to planet Estashion, heading straight for the central energy storage facility.

"So, the whole place has been taken over by a pale lump of flesh?" I asked Iris.

"That's right. What is this stuff? It's disgusting!"

It wasn't long before we could see it for ourselves on the cameras. The new pirate ship's hull and the storage facility were connected together by a lump of bluish flesh. It was bubbling up in places, and there were veins visibly running along its surface.

That was probably... Squallow. The Berserker Cells could change a body into anything. Shirley was probably using the master chip to fuse his body with the machinery like some kind of twisted cyborg.

"Even if she's got the know-how as an engineer... that's crazy," Raul whispered.

"Yeah... You're right." I nodded.

To be honest, it was awful to look at. But we had to press on.

"But why aren't the other warships around attacking us? We're a pirate ship, too. I don't understand why they don't think we're together."

"Shirley is probably down at the bottom of her ship right now. She's busy taking over the facility and tuning up the master chip amplifier. Those aren't things she can leave to the pirates, after all."

"But her men can still see us, right?"

"Everyone on Estashion, including the pirates, is currently under her control. But that doesn't mean that Shirley sees everything they see. Until she gives them orders, they're no different than dolls."

"...Dolls, huh?" Rosalind looked disgusted.

I didn't say anything, but I felt the same way.

Was this really the world that you wanted, Shirley?

"This gives us a chance though, right?" Raul asked. "Let's head right up next to it and dock, Fam."

"I know that!" Fam yelled. Her eyes were fixed straight ahead—she was staring at what used to be Squallow.

The pirate ship broke through the clouds, flew through the sky, and eventually reached the hijacked ship above the energy storage facility.

“What do we do now?”

“We get up on top of it so it can’t take off. Then we fire anchor rails for boarding and use them to break inside!”

There was a rumbling, and our ship landed directly on top of the one Shirley had stolen.

“Men! Let’s go!”

The pirates cheered as they headed for the transporter on the main bridge. Just like the short warp that had taken us from the dock to the coast on Berano, this transporter could instantly teleport us to the anchor rails.

“Iris, we’re about to board Shirley’s ship! Get out of the storage facility and save as many Estashionians as you can!”

“Got it!”

“I’m counting on you!”

I ended the call and turned towards everyone on board.

“Okay! Are we ready?”

“Indeed.”

“Yup!”

“...!”

Rosalind, Tetra, and Rain all looked ready to go.

“Yeah! But... this is a little hard to move in.”

Fam answered boldly, but she was looking a little uncomfortable in her tight outfit. I’d had her change into what she needed to wear for the job I wanted her to do, but she didn’t seem to like it much.

“Raul, Garnet, I’m counting on you, too.”

“Of course.”

“Sure, sure. I’ll make it happen, I guess.”

I’d asked both of them to do an important job, too. Garnet had undergone some repairs during the warp, and could now just barely run. It would be tough, but I asked her to do her best.

“Okay, here we go!”

We got inside the transporter and instantly moved to the bottom of the ship we were on.

“What’s this slide thing?”

“The anchor rails. We use them to get inside the enemy ship.”

Fam gave me the rundown, briefly explaining how they used large tubes that they fired right into the enemy ship in order to board it. One after another, people were hopping into the slide, which was almost a sheer drop, by the way.

“Nwaaah! Wait, huh?!”

Halfway down, I realized that I had no idea how I was going to land. But just before the slide came to an abrupt stop, I felt like I passed through a thin membrane, and I ended up landing on the floor with very little impact, as if I'd been caught by a cushion.

"Space technology is always so amazing... Bwuh!"

"Don't stand at the bottom of the slide, dummy!" Fam, who was the next one down, yelled as she landed on me.

And with that, we were inside the enemy vessel.

"Okay, let's head for the bottom where Shirley is."

Garnet and the pirates who'd worked on the ship knew its layout well. Since Garnet couldn't run, we had the pirates take the lead, but the path there wasn't without its obstacles.

When we turned the corner, we were faced with men and women silently staring at us like zombies. Shirley's pirates were blocking our way.

"Tch. I guess she felt the impact from when we landed on top of her," Raul said.

The Seageists with us set their blades and laser guns to non-lethal and began to fight.

"Everybody, don't forget to hold back! Just keep them busy here until we can save the boss!"

Fam, me, the other girls, and a few of the pirates split away from the main group and headed for the lower floors while the rest of the Seageists kept Shirley's mind control subjects distracted. Our job was to save Squallow.

"Please come this way. There is a teleporter in this room that will take you to the bottom."

"Gotcha."

I followed Garnet's lead and entered the room she indicated. Sure enough, there was a teleporter in the corner. We stopped for a moment to catch our breath. Once we used the teleporter, we'd be face-to-face with Shirley and Squallow.

"Tetra, Rain... are you ready?"

I was most concerned about the two of them. Their stamina wasn't as good as the others'.

"Yes... I'm all right."

"Let's hurry."

Neither one looked like they were ready in the slightest, but they both nodded assuredly at me.

"Don't worry. I'll always be there to bail a girl's butt out when she's in trouble. Oh, but I don't mean that in a dirty way."

"Maybe you just should've left that last part out? Well, whatever. Thanks, Raul. This plan depends on you."

"Sure thing. Want to go over it one last time?"

We went over the plan again and finished the last of our preparations.

"All right! Here we go."

I slapped myself on the cheeks to fire myself up, then got inside the teleporter.

▽

The bottom of the ship's hull was lit, but it certainly didn't seem bright. It wasn't cramped, but it wasn't too big, either. And most importantly, in the center of the room were Squallow and Shirley.

"Guuuuuh..."

Squallow seemed to have grown even bigger than the last time I'd seen him at first glance. But when I looked closer, I realized that I could only see the top half of his body. The lower half seemed to have gone through the floor and fused with something else... probably the energy storage facility.

Behind him was a machine that looked like a tiny tower, and it seemed to be running right now. Was that the master chip amplifier?

"Boss."

"Captain."

"Captain Squallow..."

Fam and the other pirates all called out to their now disfigured leader. Some were gritting their teeth, and some were just too shocked to react much at all. But then everyone looked at the person who'd done this to him—Shirley. She was wearing a white lab coat and had her hair down now. Behind her glasses, cold eyes indifferently observed all of us.

"Rekka... So, you survived, huh?" There was a slight tone of shock in her voice.

"I was lucky, yeah."

"Was it Raul there who saved you? I thought the only thing he was good for was keeping himself alive. I guess I was wrong. I think I even remember using a Time Stop on Rosalind, too, or was I mistaken?"

No one answered her question.

"Hmph. Well, it doesn't matter. Now that you've come back from the brink of death, what are you doing here? Did you come to stop me?"

"I came to save your story."

"My 'story'? That's a strange way to put it. You make it sound like a fairy tale." She giggled at me. "But you know, Rekka, if you really mean that you want to save me, then leave this planet now. Or do you want to be mine after all?"

"Are you asking if I want to join your ideal world? I already said no."

"That's why I'm asking again."

"It doesn't matter how many times you ask. The answer is still no."

Her eyes narrowed as she glared at me.

"Then..."

"Shirley! Stop it!" Tetra took a step forward and yelled.

But all that did was annoy Shirley.

"Tetra, you're going to refuse, too, aren't you? Even you don't want to join my ideal world. There really isn't anyone I can trust, is there? So all of you can just disappear."

"Guuuuuh..."

Squallow began to move.

"Raul, take care of Tetra and Rain for me!"

The noncombatants moved back while everybody else spread out and made a break for Shirley.

"Squallow, first aim for that gremlin."

Man, I knew Shirley would go for Fam. Fam had already succeeded in destroying part of the master chip, even if it was only after her powers had gone out of control. Of course she'd be cautious about her. But I'd expected this.

"Hmph! That was the most obvious move you could've made."

Rosalind blocked Squallow's blow before it could reach Fam. Since I knew she'd be a target, I'd assigned her an escort ahead of time. And since she was focusing on Fam...

"Shirley!" I shouted.

"Get her!" the pirates all cried.

The pirates and I kept our distance from Rosalind and Fam, spreading out in a wide fan as we charged for Shirley. Destroying the master chip wasn't the only way to put an end to this. If Shirley was knocked out, she wouldn't be able to control Squallow anymore, and we could destroy the amplifier. To that end, we were using Fam, the greatest threat, as a decoy.

"Did you really think it would be that easy?"

But she saw through my simple plan.

"Guuuuuh…"

Huh? Suddenly a robot arm that stretched unnaturally out of Squallow's trunk swiped out and knocked us all away.

"Gah!"

I ended up airborne.

"Rekka!"

"…I'm all right! Barely!"

Tetra ran to help me, but I shouted for her to stay away and quickly got to my feet again. I was able to block the blow, but the force of it had still knocked me back. Unfortunately, I broke my stun gun in the process. My arm hurt really bad, too. The gun must have absorbed enough of the impact that none of my bones were broken, but…

Something else caught my attention.

The pirates who'd been knocked away were starting to get up, as well, but about half of them seemed to be down for the count. I saw one of the smaller pirates panting, barely able to even breathe after such a powerful attack.

"Anybody who's hurt, don't force yourself! Only follow me if you can still fight!"

There was no answer, but to my surprise, I watched as all of the pirates gritted their teeth and stood back up. Talk about guts!

"Guuuuuh…"

In addition to his original arms—though they'd changed so much I didn't even know if that's what I should call them anymore—there were three more limbs growing from his stomach and another growing from his chest, making Squallow look like some kind of twisted asura.

If she could change somebody's body into anything and use that for surprise attacks like that… This would be tough. There was basically no way for me to predict how he would attack. Even Rosalind was having trouble with these quickly changing arms. The joints could move in any direction, and what was worse, he could even grow more joints so that his limbs could bend in strange, unexpected ways. He could even create new arms from his elbows or palms. There were endless possibilities.

This maybe wasn't the best example, but he reminded me of the plastic models I used to mess around with when I was a kid. The kind where the parts were interchangeable and you could attach things wherever you wanted. Like putting a leg where an arm should go, for instance.

"What will you do now, Rekka? The Estashionian armed forces under my control are starting to board this ship. Once they make it past your friends on the upper levels, they'll head straight here. And when that happens, it's checkmate."

"Sorry, but chess isn't my game. You've gotta be able to see dozens of moves ahead, and frankly, I don't see how anybody does that. But I do know that you never really know who the winner is until the game is actually over."

"I see… Then what if I do this?"

Shirley snapped her fingers and made a gesture like something pressing upwards from below.

"Kyaaah!" the girls screamed from behind me.

I turned around and saw that Squallow's new, seventh arm—or perhaps it would be better to just call it a tentacle at this point—had broken through the floor and captured the girls on the sideline as well as their guard.

"Tetra! Rain! Raul!"

So Squallow's body had already merged with the ship and the energy storage facility! That meant even the floor we were standing on was a part of him! The arm that had grabbed them kept growing, carrying them closer to Shirley and Squallow.

"Hostages. It's not the most elegant method, but it seems like one that will work on you. Though I can't speak for those pirates."

Crap. The pirates couldn't move now either, though. If Shirley wanted it to, the floor could grow arms that would instantly impale us all.

"Hmph. Girl, come here."

Rosalind brought Fam closer to her, recognizing the danger. The battle had come to a temporary halt, but the advantage was definitely Shirley's.

"Now that I have these hostages, what should I do with them? Make them play rock-paper-scissors and kill whoever loses?"

Shirley sounded bored. I wasn't sure if she was joking or if she was just that far gone. It was like she didn't care about any of this.

"Shirley, stop this. You know this isn't going to make anything better, don't you?"

"That's not true. Once I have my ideal world, everything will change. I'll have everything… and I won't lose anything anymore."

Was it her betrayal at the hands of the adults around her that did this to her? She'd been born in a test tube with no love from her parents. She was raised only for her abilities. She had no say in the matter and no freedom. She'd thrown herself into her work to try and forget about it all, but in the end, even her work betrayed her. She'd lost everything… Is that what made her so afraid of loss? Is that why she wanted a world where everyone would obey her? An ideal world where she never would be betrayed again?

"…Yeah, okay. If your ideal world is what you say it is, maybe you won't have to lose anything again—"

"Right? If you understand, then you should join…"

"But once you're in that world, what then?"

"…What?"

We stared each other down.

"You told me that there were three things you needed for your world, right? If you have the Mermaid Princess's Tear, you can make a world where it's always warm like spring. With the master chip, maybe you can stop everyone from hurting each other. But…"

Even with those, there was still something her ideal world was lacking.

"Where will you get your friends, Shirley? You said you always wanted to be with your friends."

"Yes, I did say that."

"Even somewhere it's always warm like spring and no one hurts each other… That's not a world. It's just an environment. Shirley, there was only one thing you really wanted, right?"

"…What are you talking about? With the master chip, everyone will become my friend. Perfect friends who will never betray or hurt me—"

"Those wouldn't be friends. They'd just be dolls," I said, cutting Shirley off. "Shirley, it's not wrong to try and grab happiness for yourself. It's a good thing. But there are some things that only other people can give you."

"I don't know what you're talking about. The only thing I've ever been given by anyone else is a cold knife in the back."

Shirley shook her head a little and glared at me. She looked to me like a child who was about to cry.

"This is the only way I can make friends."

"That ain't true."

"It *is* true."

Shirley shook her head stubbornly once more.

"It ain't."

But I was stubborn, too.

In this case, especially so. I had all the proof I needed. I was the proof.

"I'm already your friend. That's what I told you by the window at Ryugu Palace."

She gasped. "But that's…"

"And not just me. Tetra, Rain, everybody else there… We all thought of you as a friend."

"Of course we did!" Tetra yelled to back me up.

Shirley's expression eased for a moment… and then twisted with violent rage.

"Shut… Shut up! Who cares what you say?! You can say anything you want! I can't trust you! Even the grown-ups who betrayed me were all smiles as long as I was useful to them! But they were all stone-faced when they betrayed me in the end!"

Her head reeled around like an angry child throwing a tantrum.

"If you're my friends, then don't get in my way! What's wrong with my ideal world? There won't be any sudden rains, and no one will hurt each other! If you want to be my friends, then you can be my friends there!"

"I can't do that. How many people are you going to hurt to make all that happen?"

Her face twisted up even more.

"If you're getting in my way, then you can't be my friend. You're going to betray me someday! I just know it! I don't want to be betrayed again! You're going to… save me? I can't believe that! You're lying! All of you should just disappear!"

"We're not going to disappear. If you can't do whatever it takes to stop your friend from making a huge mistake, how can you call yourself a real friend?"

I sensed the floor below me about to give out, so I hurriedly jumped to the side. Not a moment later, a huge blade burst forth from below where I'd been standing. It would've sliced me in two.

"Rosalind!" I yelled as I ran from more blades coming out of the floor after me.

"Leave it to me!"

Rosalind grabbed Fam's cape…

"Do it, girl!"

And threw her hard like a baseball.

"Don't tell me you think you can use that to destroy the master chip. Squallow!"

"Guuuuuh…"

One of Squallow's robot arms stretched out to knock her down. Shirley smiled coldly as she watched her fall to the ground… but right above her, the real Fam—who'd been transformed into Rain with the help of Raul's disguises—used her knife to slice through the tentacle. Fam landed softly like a cat, and it was only then that Shirley realized who she was. She saw the tiny horn she'd been hiding with makeup and her bangs.

"What?! How?!" she yelled in a voice that was close to a scream.

Shirley then looked towards the Fam that Squallow had knocked down a moment ago: Raul, who'd used his powers to adjust his skeleton and even change his voice.

"Give me back the boss!"

Of course, the real Fam wasn't wearing her headband. Sparks were flying from her horn as she got emotional. Just a few steps closer and her electromagnetic waves would work their magic.

"Tch! Stop her!"

She probably didn't fully understand what had happened yet, but Shirley gave Squallow the word to get rid of her anyway. Obeying her orders from the master chip, Squallow tried to use his nearest robot arm to swat her away, but...

"...Overload."

Raul—really Garnet in disguise—ripped through the tentacle arm that was holding her and used the last of her strength to block the blow and protect Fam.

"That voice... Is that you, Garnet?!" Shirley yelled in shock.

She'd had no idea Garnet was even there.

Fam had disguised herself as Rain, and Raul disguised himself as Fam. Garnet was close to Raul's height, so she'd filled in and pretended to be him. She'd fooled Shirley without saying a word. Having a fake Raul there was important. Shirley had seen Raul's disguise abilities at Ryugu Palace, so I'd wanted her to think that he wasn't in disguise at the moment.

If a simple decoy operation wouldn't work, then maybe a triple decoy would. It was the one chance we had.

"Uwaaah!"

And Fam used that chance we'd been given to close in and slam her head against the master chip.

Krrsh!

Her strong desire to bring back Squallow supercharged her power. She shattered through the protective coating and destroyed the master chip.

"Guwuuh..."

The blades stopped coming out of the floor, and Squallow froze.

"..."

Shirley spent so long staring at the shattered pieces of the ring on the ground that I thought she might be counting them. Eventually her lips curled upwards in a self-effacing grin.

"A disguise... I guess a master thief can even change the appearance of others. So where's the real Rain?"

"...Here."

The tiny pirate that Squallow had knocked away at the start stood up and removed her makeup, revealing her beautiful face.

"Please stop this, Shirley."

She opened the palm of her hand and revealed its contents to Shirley.

"Is that... the Mermaid Princess's Tear?

"Yes. This is the real one. What you stole was a fake that Raul planted. I've been using the power of this stone ever since we reached Estashion."

Yup. That's what I'd asked Rain to do.

To make it happen, I'd had them perform surgery to get it out of my stomach while we were in warp on our way to Estashion. But since there was no anesthesia, I literally thought it was going to kill me. Thanks to Raul, I healed immediately after the procedure, but if it had gone on any longer, I might've just willed myself dead.

"Thunderclouds, fog, electromagnetic storms... Many types of weather can cause wireless communications to fail. That's why you wanted to stabilize this planet's weather, right? I don't know if it worked perfectly, but I think I've been able to stop most of the Estashionians from hurting themselves like you wanted them to."

"...I see." Shirley looked down at the ground. "I've lost everything... again."

"That's not true." I walked over to her and offered her my hand. "I still think of you as my friend."

Shirley stayed silent as she stared at my hand.

"And I'm not your only friend. There's Garnet, and everyone else here."

"Garnet..." Shirley's eyes narrowed as she turned her gaze towards the badly damaged android. "I thought that you would be the one person who would never betray me. That's why I made you. So why...?"

Garnet said nothing.

"Did you forget, even though you were the one who made her?" I asked.

"What?"

"Garnet was built with a learning-enabled AI, right? As she gains experience and memories, she gets stronger. She didn't obey you because you made her. She was with you because she decided on her own that she wanted to help you."

Shirley's eyes wavered with uncertainty.

"...Is that true?"

"...Yes, Shirley."

Shirley fell silent again. And then she reached out her hand towards mine...

"You won't fool me!"

...and slapped it away. Then she turned and started to run.

"Shirley?!"

She ignored me and ran towards the back of the room where the master chip amplifier was. When she reached it, she slid something into a control panel. Immediately afterward, Squallow began to roar.

"Guwwroooahgahh!"

"Wh-What?! Didn't we stop Squallow by destroying the master chip?"

"Ahahaha! There's a backup chip in the amplifier! It's not as powerful, but it still works!" Shirley cackled as she looked up at the roof.

"Girl! We're going to destroy that thing!"

"Righ—"

Rosalind and Fam started to head for the amplifier, but...

"It's useless."

"Guaaaah!"

Several of Squallow's robot arms reached out and grabbed the amplifier. They yanked it out of the floor, and then he absorbed it into his back like some kind of strange backpack. Several more layers of flesh lumps and metal moved to cover it. They were keeping it in place and protecting it.

"Now it won't be so easy to destroy it, will it?"

Even after absorbing the amplifier, Squallow continued to reach out for anything in his path, devouring all the machinery and metal he could find. His flesh would move to cover bits and pieces of them, and once part of his body, they would protrude grotesquely here and there from the mass that was now Squallow.

"Tch! Raul! Can you feed Squallow some of your flesh to fix him?"

That was the last part of my original plan. Just like how he'd restored Fam's cyborg arm, I was hoping he could also fix Squallow. But...

"Ugh! Ack! It's no good! I can't get close!"

Whenever he tried to get to Squallow's mouth—or his chest or head or any other weak point—the robot arms and blades became more violent. And with every passing minute, Squallow's body was getting bigger and more dangerous.

"Shirley! What did you tell Squallow to do?!"

"Destroy this planet."

"What?!"

Shirley giggled as she unsteadily walked across the uneven ground.

"The Berserker Cells change a subject's body in the way that most matches their desires. Once he gets big enough to execute my orders, Squallow will start to destroy this planet."

"What are you talking about? If you do that, you'll die, too!"

"That's fine. It's all fine. As long as I can take them with me, then... that's enough..."

"You idiot!"

I ran towards her and tried to get her to snap out of it. But...

"Guaaaah!"

Several of the tentacles headed towards her, and Shirley just stood there looking up at them. At this distance, I wouldn't get there in time!

"Shirley!"

It was Tetra that ran up and knocked her out of the way.

"Huh?"

I caught Shirley and heard her whisper to herself in astonishment, and then I quickly reached out my other arm for Tetra…

But I couldn't reach her! My fingers only brushed against her clothes before grabbing air. Now in Shirley's place, it was Tetra's body that was lifted up into the air and then absorbed into Squallow's chest.

"Tetra!"

"Rekka… Agh!"

Tetra tried to get away, but the tentacles and cables in the mass wrapped around her so tightly that she couldn't.

"Why… Tetra…" Shirley whispered in my arms.

"Run… away." Tetra looked me in the eyes as she moaned in pain. "Rekka, find… my eyes…"

"Guaaaah!"

Squallow roared once more before his upper body rose into the ceiling, disappearing with Tetra and lifting up the entire floor with him.

"Tetra!"

"Rekka! Come this way!"

Rosalind grabbed me. She held me and Shirley under her arms as she headed for the teleporter. I tried to struggle, but I was helpless against the strength of a vampire.

"Rosalind!"

"Quiet. We're basically inside his stomach. Even I won't be able to protect everyone forever!"

Rosalind kept moving. She gave everyone the order to retreat as she protected us from the constantly changing floors and ceilings. In the end, we were able to gather up everyone, including the pirates and soldiers that were now free of the master chip, and get them back to the anchor rails and onto the Seageists' ship.

"Girl! You need to get this ship out of here!"

"I know! Hang on, everybody!"

The pirate ship purged the anchor rails and began to rise up and away from the central storage facility.

SMASH!

There was a loud impact as the floor shook.

"We're under attack! Evasive maneuvers!"

The shouting of pirates falling into their battle stations echoed throughout the ship as it began to shake violently.

"Tch...!"

I ran to the window and looked outside, hoping I could at least get a gander at what was going on. Below I could see the energy storage facility and Shirley's ship roaring and snapping as they changed form, becoming a giant of flesh and steel. I could still only see the top half of his body, but Squallow's giant, twisted arms were taking swipes at the Seageists' ship.

Another huge rumble. At this rate, the ship was going to be taken out!

"Damn it! We're getting out of that thing's range! More power to the engines!"

"Grrowaaah!"

The giant screamed as we just barely dodged one last blow, and then the pirate ship sped up.

"Guaaaah!"

The giant's legs tore out of the facility and it rose up as if it was following us. It must have finished making its lower half underground. Just before the giant receded into the distance, we saw Squallow's actual body protrude through its forehead. Tetra was patched into its flesh not too far from him.

"Tetra!"

But there was no way she could hear me from the rapidly ascending pirate ship. We sped up and off, right out of the giant's sight.

▽

The pirate ship circled around the thunderclouds that Rain had summoned as we watched the giant continue to rampage across the landscape. We tried to get close several times, but each time we did, the giant would attack, and we'd have no choice but to retreat by rising above the clouds. The giant wasn't particularly fast, but because our ship wasn't particularly agile, either, we had no way of dodging its attacks.

On the main bridge monitor, we could see the giant destroying the city around the central energy storage facility. It was like something out of a monster movie.

All I could do was think now. I looked down on the terrifying sight from the window of the pirate ship. The giant looked huge on the monitor, but from up here he was just a speck on the ground. There was no real point to seeing it with my own eyes rather than on the computer, but I felt compelled to look.

Tetra and Squallow were down there. How was I supposed to save them? And then there was what Tetra said...

“Find my eyes...”

What did that mean? My train of thought was interrupted by the quiet sound of footsteps as Shirley approached and stood next to me.

She was staring out the window in shock. Maybe she was trying to find Tetra, too, even though it would be impossible to see her from here.

“Why did Tetra... try to save me?” Shirley whispered. She didn’t even seem to realize she was speaking.

She might finally have the one thing that had always been denied her, and that was thanks to Tetra. I decided to answer for her since she wasn’t there to do it herself.

“Because she’s your friend, of course.”

Shirley grimaced in sorrow. She collapsed like all the strength had drained from her body, and she started to tremble.

“I can’t take this anymore... What am I doing? I just want to die...”

As she sobbed, I could see her head shake. She looked like a little girl who’d gotten lost on the way home.

“Don’t say you want to die.”

“Then what am I supposed to do? I want to go back into the past and rip myself apart. I never should’ve been born. My whole life was a farce anyway.”

Large, sorrowful tears rolled down her face.

“Shirley...”

Garnet saw her crying and wiped the tears away with her fingers. Shirley grabbed her hand and held it up to her cheek.

“It’s silly to complain about being born.”

I thwacked my palm lightly against the side of my head as if I was rebooting my brain.

“That’s just giving up thinking. And as long as you’re alive, you’ve got to keep thinking. About today, about tomorrow, about what you have to do to be happy, and about what you can do to make up for your failures.”

“...What am I supposed to do?”

“What do you want to do?” I asked back.

“But... I don’t have the right to say it.” Shirley was hesitant.

“We’re friends, right?”

She looked shocked when I said that.

“That’s all that you need, I think.”

Shirley closed her eyes and wiped the rest of her tears away with the sleeve of her lab coat before she stood up.

“I... I want to save Tetra.”

“Good. So do I,” I said.

For whatever reason, Shirley finally smiled.

"Tetra was right. You really did come to save me."

"Huh? Of course I did."

"Tetra believed you would. When the pirates caught us, she never doubted that you'd come."

That seems… kind of embarrassing…? Wait a second. If Tetra was sure I'd come to save her, then what she meant earlier…

"So that's it…"

It was a hint. It was a clue she left to help me when I came to save her. But it was far too thin a thread. Tetra must have known that when she told me. It was only a tiny sliver of hope. One that might never help at all.

Either way, we'd first have to get past the giant's attacks. I glanced out the window and happened to see a black cloud hanging in the sky below us. Suddenly I had a new idea.

The operation to save Squallow had almost been successful. We hadn't lost the means of carrying it out. The question now was how we would get close enough to the giant to save Squallow and Tetra, and I'd just come up with a way to do it. Shirley, Rain, Fam… All the pieces came together thanks to the thread that Tetra had left me.

"Guys, listen…"

Everybody turned towards me.

"This time, I want to save everyone's story. And I need your help!"

▽

The giant kept rampaging through the city. I had to stop it before the damage got any worse.

"Rain, do it," I said into the mic. Rain was listening to me from the deck of the ship.

"Right!"

Rain closed her eyes and put her hands together in prayer. She was holding the Mermaid Princess's Tear. As she prayed wordlessly, the feed on one of the monitors in the room—the one showing us what was directly beneath the ship—began to change.

The sky was filled with the remnants of the thunderclouds she'd summoned, and now they were swelling up and forming into a single black mass. It kept getting thicker and larger. We eventually couldn't even see the city or the giant below us anymore. The black cloud covered the sky into the far distance, and it only continued to get denser.

"Hahh… hahh…"

I could hear Rain panting through the speakers.

"Rain, you can st—"

"Not yet… I can keep going…"

Rain cut me off and pressed on, using even more of the power of the Mermaid Princess's Tear. The clouds were coming together far quicker than they had when we'd been aboard Shirley's ship.

"The thunderclouds are threatening to touch the ship. Adjusting altitude," one of the pirates said, and the ship began to climb.

Below us was now the dark, massive cloud that Rain had summoned. It was so thick that it obscured any light from the surface, and it was far larger than anything you'd see in nature.

"Haaahh..."

"Rain!"

Rain used up the last of her power and collapsed on the deck. The pirates with her helped her up.

"...Thanks. Get some rest."

Rain was so tired that she couldn't even respond other than nodding. Some of the crew then helped her back into the ship. She'd used all her strength to help me.

"Shirley, how are we looking?"

I pointed to the black cloud.

"...Yeah, it looks good. It's sufficiently dense to block out 99 percent of the sun. It should be pitch black below us," she said, staring at the main bridge computer as she spoke.

With the central energy storage facility down, the Estashionian city beneath us would be completely without power. A blackout and no sun. Utter darkness. That was the first stage of the plan. Next was...

"Okay. Then once I give the signal, break through the clouds and begin the attack run."

"Aye aye, sir." The pirate who we'd designated the stand-in captain nodded and gave me a firm pat on the chest. "Take care of Fam. And save Captain Squallow."

I nodded.

"Leave it to me... Now let's go, Fam, Shirley."

"Right!"

"Indeed."

Both of them followed me through the transporter to the bottom of the ship. Once we were there, we used a monitor to connect with the main bridge. When I confirmed that the connection was working, I offered Shirley my right arm.

"Let's do this."

"Okay..."

Shirley took out a medical gun, the syringe of which was filled with Berserker Cells.

"Like I told you before, any physical changes you induce with the Berserker Cells will result in extreme pain. This made even trained soldiers go mad after a few minutes."

"I just need a strong spirit, right?"

I tried to make a joke, but Shirley didn't laugh.

"I still think I should be doing this myself," she protested.

"I can't let a girl do something this painful. I'm doing it."

"...If you don't think you can take it, use the flesh of immortality Raul gave you immediately," Shirley said reluctantly as she held the needle against my arm. "The key is simplicity: focus on what you want to do in the most basic terms possible. If you let the pain distract you, it will make the transformation much harder."

"Right."

Shirley winced and pulled the trigger on the medical gun, releasing the Berserker Cells into my body.

"A-Aah... Gwaaah!"

The first thing I felt was my brain, or rather my mind, spreading out through my whole body. I could even feel the blood flowing through my veins. The price, however, was terrible pain. Especially my head. It felt like it was going to burst.

"Rekka! Rekka!"

"You wimp! Hang in there!"

"...I'm fine. Let's get going."

Shirley and Fam's worried voices made my head pound, but I mostly ignored them and gave the signal to the main bridge. Just a moment later, the floor shook, and the ship descended through the black clouds. The storm clouds were alive with lightning. Even the Berserker Cells wouldn't be enough to get me through that alive.

But no matter how thick the clouds, it was a piece of cake for the ship to pierce through them. I only had seconds. I didn't have time to complain about the pain. I started by trying to change my eyes so that they could see in the dark like an owl.

"Gah... Hrrngh..."

Yeah... I couldn't see myself doing this for long. It really would be a race against time. But it worked. And now that my night vision was stronger, the room seemed brighter. I narrowed my eyes and first turned towards Fam.

"Fam... You can take off your headband now."

"Are you sure?"

"One more headache won't kill me. I'd rather deal with the pain than risk you not having time to take it off later."

"...Got it."

Fam took off her headband, and once I was sure it was working (though, honestly, the pain was already so bad that it was hard to tell), I turned back to Shirley.

"Shirley, you go back to the main bridge. Just handle the rest like we talked about."

"Right. Come back safe, okay?"

Those were her last words before she went through the teleporter.

"...Ngh!"

Next, I enhanced my hearing. Even with night vision, the sharper my senses were in the dark, the better.

"Guh... Aagh!"

And then the most important part: the wings. I felt something piercing through the skin of my back, and when I focused on them, I could hear the sound of them flapping.

"Hey... Are you really okay?"

"I'm... fine. Just get me to the loading dock..."

The ship had a loading dock for moving cargo on and off board. When we made it through the clouds, we were going to use it to jump ship.

"We're breaking through!" I heard one of the pirates say.

"I'm opening it up!" Fam said next.

And then I felt a strong wind against my cheeks and heard the strong roar that came with it. I was a little startled, but I opened my narrowed eyes and looked down at the surface. With the power off and the sun blocked by the clouds, the only thing shining now... should be Tetra's eyes!

"I see her! Let's go!"

"!"

Fam wrapped her arms around my waist, and I focused my mind on flying towards Tetra. I felt my body rise up, and then I began to glide towards the surface at incredible speed. Of course, I had no idea how to fly. Thankfully the Berserker Cells altered my body to move the wings in the way I needed them to. However...

"Gah! Gaaaaaaaah!"

My whole body was racked with pain. My very nerves were screaming. It was like ice picks were being jammed through my body and a hammer was crushing my flesh into paste. The pain of using the Berserker Cells was serious enough that I was worried about passing out.

"Don't you go soft on me now, wimp!"

"...!"

Fam's voice brought me back from the brink of unconsciousness. My flight path stabilized, and I opened my eyes wide. The pain made my vision blurry, but I knew I had to grit my teeth and bear it.

"Hang on!" I yelled.

I ordered the Berserker Cells to make me go faster. There was more pain, but it worked. As we approached, I heard a roar from below.

"Grwaaah!"

The giant's arm shot at me like a spear. I just barely dodged it. As I'd expected, the giant had changed its own body to be able to see in the dark, as well. It was really the only option in this pitch black, but that was just what I wanted!

"Now!"

Shirley's order came down from a megaphone on the pirate ship overhead. I closed my eyes just as the sky exploded above me. I knew what it was. The ship had fired its plasma cannon off into the distance, far away from me and Squallow. And then...

"Gyaaaah!"

The giant screamed. Night vision worked by gathering light-sensitive cells into the retina of the eye so that you could see even at night when there was very little light from the moon and stars. It worked great if you were nocturnal, but it was too strong in regular light levels. Seeing a bright flash when using night vision would be enough to either temporarily or permanently blind you.

That was the point of the plasma cannon. I'd closed my eyes and looked down to avoid the blast of light, but the giant had been looking up at me and taken it head-on. We hadn't been able to get to the giant before, but now he was totally defenseless. I raced towards him as fast as I could. This was my only chance!

"Grrowaaah!"

Huh? At the last second, the giant rallied with a roar.

Squallow, still attached to the giant's forehead, raised his head and looked up at me. His left arm changed shape... Was that the plasma cannon I'd seen at Ryugu Palace?!

Crap! If I kept my eyes open, the plasma cannon would blind me. But if I closed them, I couldn't dodge it. I had no idea which was the better option. But in the midst of my turmoil, two tiny hands covered my eyes.

"Dodge like I tell you to!" Fam yelled into my ear.

Even without night vision, she could see when the plasma cannon was firing.

"Go right!"

I twisted my body to the right as hard as I could. I felt a blast of heat right next to me.

"Gaaaaah!"

I leveled myself out again and forced myself to land on the giant's forehead, right next to the Squallow and Tetra.

"Tetra!"

In a single step, I covered the distance between me and Tetra, and I used my enhanced strength to tear through the cables and tentacles to free her.

"Graaah!" Squallow roared.

Hundreds of fleshy spears sprouted from the giant's forehead, all of them pointed at me.

"Fam!" I yelled.

"Boss! WAKE UP!" Fam screamed as she released a maximum-power electromagnetic wave from her horn.

Strengthened by her feelings, the pulse hit Squallow and the master chip amplifier on his back directly.

“Guaah...”

Squallow groaned in intense pain, but the blades and tentacles that were about to attack us all came to a stop. Right now, Squallow was only following orders from the master chip amplifier. Once the machine started to malfunction, he shut down, too.

Now that I could get to him without him killing me, I jammed the immortal flesh I’d taken from Raul into Squallow’s mouth. There was no point in using it on the giant made out of metal and Berserker Cells. I needed to get it into the part that was really Squallow in order for the flesh to do its job. That’s why I’d gone to all this trouble.

“Guh... waaah!”

Squallow screamed, but then fell silent. When the screaming stopped, his mask fell off. I could see his face, unharmed, underneath.

Then there was a snapping sound as the plasma cannon shattered only to be replaced with a blue arm. The immortal flesh had returned Squallow to his original, perfectly healthy form, and his body separated from the giant’s. He was now—finally—himself again.

“Boss! Aah! You’re heavy!”

“Wait! Are you okay, Fam?!”

Fam tried to grab Squallow and was almost crushed under his weight. I ran to her side to help.

Epilogue

With its core gone, the giant began to fall apart. We escaped from its collapsing forehead and landed on one of the surviving buildings in the city.

"Mmgh!"

I swallowed the other piece of Raul's flesh that I'd been given. It gave my body the power to reject the Berserker Cells, and I returned to normal. Just like Shirley had said, the pain had almost driven me insane... but I'd managed to pull it off.

"Guh..."

Squallow had also returned to normal—to his original merman form from before he'd even become a cyborg—and slowly woke up.

"Boss!"

Fam grabbed him in a hug. He slowly lifted a hand and patted her on the head.

"...I guess I worried you, didn't I?"

"That doesn't matter!"

Fam started to cry. I figured she probably didn't want anyone seeing that, so I turned away and watched the pirate ship swoop in to pick us up.

Then I contacted Iris and the other girls to get them to meet up with us. I'd asked them to help the townspeople, but once they saw what happened with the energy storage facility, they'd switched to evacuating them instead.

I was worried that not many had made it out, but I was thinking in Earth terms. I was used to the fastest mode of transportation being a car, but the citizens here had flying vehicles and access to things like Iris's warp watch.

"Between the military alert and the pirate attack, everyone knew something was up. Most everyone had evacuated before this even started, so it all worked out."

"I see. Glad to hear it. Thanks, Iris."

As for Shirley's attempt to get all of the adults to kill themselves via the master chip amplifier, between her order for their deaths to be slow, our unexpected interference, and Rain's help, no one had actually died.

Fam and Rain were standing on either side of Squallow, but Shirley and Garnet were standing a bit away.

Everyone was silent. Everybody here knew Shirley's story. They knew it was possible to sympathize with her, but…

“Shirley… I’m not a hero, and I’m not the police. I just wanted to save everyone. But…”

That was just what I wanted to do. I couldn’t force my way of seeing things onto Rain, who’d lost her mother, or Squallow, who’d been forced to kill Muse. What they thought about Shirley was a different matter.

“…”

“Rekka, don’t make that face.”

Shirley rubbed her slender fingers against my cheek.

“You said you were my friend, right? That’s enough for me.”

“Shirley… Um…”

“Thank you, too, Tetra. And… I’m sorry.”

After apologizing, Shirley headed towards Rain and the pirates. Squallow, still supported by Fam, looked her dead in the eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’ll do anything I can to atone. Do with me what you will.”

Shirley lowered her head as she awaited her judgment.

“When we pirates came together, we made a few rules. One of them was forbidding vengeance against our homeland.”

Squallow’s voice was calm rather than filled with rage as he addressed Shirley.

“We’re a bunch of former refugees and poor people. Every one of us suffered back home. Once we became pirates and we learned how to use weapons and wield violence, we all wanted to tear the eyes right out of the people who used to look down on us. But I forbade that.”

A lot of what Squallow was saying applied to Shirley, too.

“Revenge taints your soul. And when a tainted soul returns to the sea after it dies, it taints the sea, too. Our ancestors allow us to shed blood in order to feed our children or protect our comrades… but in the end, revenge is just about you. It’s selfish that way. It’s about getting rid of the thorns in your heart, or feeling the joy you get when you hurt someone you’re angry at, or making the people you hate suffer. It’s just killing for pleasure.”

Shirley was silent. Squallow’s heavy words weighed heavily on her. The regret was visible on her face.

“If I take revenge on you for Muse, my father, my father’s father, and his father before him will never forgive me. And so I forgive you.”

“I… I think Squallow is right,” Rain said. “I do want you to atone, but not for the sake of revenge. Just so I can forgive you some day. Is that all right?”

“…Yes!”

Shirley was still looking down. Her shoulders were shaking softly, and Garnet gently held her in her arms.

Whether this was a truly happy ending or not... I didn't know. I couldn't help but think that if I'd been a little faster getting to the top of Ryugu Palace, I might've been able to stop Squallow from killing Muse.

"Um, sorry, but why are we all so glum? It's all over, isn't it?"

Ugh... And then he had to go and spoil the whole mood.

"Raul, would you shut up?"

"No, listen, kid. I honestly don't understand why everybody's so down now that we've reached our big conclusion."

"Look..."

I carefully chose my words as I explained to this idiot what happened at Ryugu Palace after he peaced out. But even then, Raul still looked a little confused.

"Wait, did I not tell you?"

"Huh?"

"Actually..."

I could hardly believe what he said next.

▽

A week later, I was back home, sitting on my sofa and staring at the ceiling.

"Man, that space trip was one heck of an ordeal, wasn't it?"

"Was it really any different than usual?"

R was right. I hated to admit it, but R was right.

I'd had a fun beach vacation, followed by a trip across three planets. I was still a little tired from it all.

In the end, everything had worked out thanks to Raul, but...

"Man, it still kind of pisses me off thinking about it."

"What?"

"What else? Raul. How could he have forgotten to tell us something so important?"

"Oh, right. You mean how it was actually Raul in disguise who'd almost been killed by Squallow while the real Muse had been knocked out and was hidden away in the closet?"

"Yup. That."

When Raul had split off from us during the pirate attack, he'd gone to the top floor and changed places with Muse. He'd known just by looking at them how powerful Rosalind and Suzuran were, so he left it up to us to protect Rain while he took the more dangerous job of protecting Muse. It sounded like something out of an action manga, but he'd managed to pull it off.

I heard later that even though he'd started calling himself the

"Phantom Thief Baron" about 500 years ago, he'd actually been alive for several dozen times that long. Could he be older than Earth itself? As I was thinking about that strange man who was probably still wandering through space somewhere, the front doorbell rang.

"Sir Rekka, you have visitors."

"Right... Huh?!"

Harissa led me into the living room, where I was shocked to see my "visitors." It was Rain, Fam, and Shirley.

"We came to say hello now that we're neighbors."

"R-Right..."

I bowed.

Wait, why was I bowing? What was going on?

"Um, hang on a second."

I motioned for the girls to come sit down on the sofa. I then went and got a chair from the dining room and sat across from them.

"So... neighbors?"

"Yes, that's right."

It was Rain, sitting in the center, who spoke up. Fam was too busy eating the snacks that Harissa had brought, and Shirley just silently smiled.

"Um... Fam, if I remember right, planet Berano agreed to take in the refugees from Planet Gale, and the pirates dissolved after that, right?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's right."

Crumbs of the snacks she was eating fell from Fam's mouth as she spoke.

"The mermen returned from across the galaxy to live on Berano again, and the former Seageists formed an army to protect the planet from slavers. Did I get that right?"

"Yeah. It's a resort planet though, so they're pretty much sticking to the background. Some of the people are scared of them, but the boss and the queen are making it work."

The mermaids were apparently long-lived beings. Some of their elders remembered when Squallow was the merman king. And things had come full circle. He and Queen Muse were now working together to make sure Berano flourished.

So everything seemed to check out in that department. Now the question was...

"And didn't you say you were going to help, Rain?"

"Yes. Now that I've brought mother and Squallow back together again, the next thing I want to do is fulfill my duties as princess," Rain said with a bright smile.

Next I turned to the so-far-silent Shirley.

"Shirley, you said you were going to help restore planet Berano, right…?”

“Yes, that’s right. That’s what I said when you left.”

“Okay…”

That’s what I thought. It seemed like I hadn’t forgotten anything or missed anything major. That meant all I could do was come out and ask.

"So what are the three of you doing in my house?!"

"Between the debt Estashion owns Berano after everything that happened and the fact that Finerita agreed to help with the planet's reconstruction, planet Berano is in a much better position now. But we're still not ready to come into the age of the Galactic Federation." Rain's voice was smooth and unfaltering. "And so instead of having me, the future queen, stay on Berano, it was decided—or rather, I decided—that I should go see other worlds and experience new things. My coming to school on Earth is a part of that."

"R-Right..."

Weren't there better places she could go? Iris said that Earth was basically in the middle of nowhere, so why come here?

"Wh-What about you then, Fam?"

"I'm helping the boss. He wants to build a school on Berano."

The merfolk either taught their own children or hired tutors, so the children of poorer families tended to be less educated than those who were better off. Squallow had already been trying to build a school for the children of the Seageists, so now he had moved his plans to Berano.

"Earth has a school-based education system or something. And since Big Sis Rain was going, I decided I should go, too, and learn everything I can so I can tell it to the boss."

"I see..."

So Fam had a goal of her own, too, huh? Since she'd been eating snacks this whole time, I thought she was just here to have fun. Lastly, I turned towards Shirley, who gave me a mischievous smile.

"Well, I guess I'm just here because the king and queen asked me to come with these two. If I stayed on Berano, I was at risk of the Estashionians finding me, which wouldn't be good for the planet. Garnet's here, too, by the way. She's just watching the house."

So now I had figured out why each of them was here. Fam and Rain would be starting school next week. Shirley was busy doing research to help Berano, so she would be spending most of her time at home with Garnet.

"So, you're living together? Where's your house, anyway?"

"Diagonally opposite yours."

"It's close?!"

Come to think of it, that place was on the market, wasn't it?

"So, anyway, nice to meet you, neighbor!"

"Uh... Yeah. Nice to meet you."

Rain and Shirley both bowed deeply, while Fam finished her snacks and gave me a very casual bow.

"It's, uh... good to have you here."

"I'm glad to have you here as well!"

Harissa and I both bowed.

As shocked as I was, in the end, it was great to be able to see them again. And like they said, we were neighbors now, so...

"By the way, Rekka..."

"Hm?"

Suddenly Rain leaned forward and softly grabbed both of my hands.

"Are you at all interested in running an inn?"

"...Huh?"

"Or perhaps becoming a king?"

What in the world?

"Actually... there's another reason I came to Earth."

"Is... that so?"

"As part of the royal family, it's my duty to give birth to a strong heir. And for that, I need an ideal husband. Someone I can spend my life with."

Oh, yeah. I've heard of this kind of thing. You see it in manga a lot.

It was a big responsibility for her, but talking about things like "a husband you can spend your life with" and "giving birth to an heir" to a teenage boy was probably something she should've put a little more thought into... especially while she was holding my hands. I could feel the heat in my cheeks.

"Rain, don't surprise Rekka by saying things like that."

Whew. Thanks, Shirley.

"But why? Mother gave me permission."

"And she told you to be dignified about it, didn't she? Watching over you is part of my job here. By the way, Rekka, I have no such restrictions and will be ready at any time."

"Hmph. Shirley, what are you talking about?"

"Nothing at all. I just wanted to make sure that he knew I was still pure since I haven't had any friends for so long."

"And why does he need to know that?"

And on they went. Rain would ask a question, and Shirley would dodge it. Rinse. Repeat.

Harissa, however, was starting to look extremely upset for some reason. What was going on here? Didn't they just come over to say hello?

"Oh, right."

Fam, who'd been too busy eating candy until now, finally spoke up. Her childish attitude seemed like it might be the thing to save me here.

"Wh-What is it, Fam?"

"Well, um, listen..."

She fidgeted a little, and then walked over to me...

Huh? Did I just feel something soft and wet against my cheek?

"F-F-F-Fam?! Wh-Whaddareyadoin?"

Harissa, who saw it up close, screamed in astonishment. Rain and Shirley immediately ceased their argument and stared at me.

"Listen... I've felt this weirdness in my chest ever since all that stuff happened, and when I asked the boss, he said to do this."

SQUALLOW! WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU TEACHING THIS KID?!

No, wait. I just felt something soft and wet against my cheek. That's all. I didn't actually see that it was a kiss. Maybe it wasn't. And wait, didn't this just happen to me not that long ago?

"You know, I'm really grateful to you for saving the boss. I won't call you a wimp anymore. From now on, you're Big Brother Rekka."

Well, that didn't sound so bad...

Wait, no! Somebody do something about this! And do something about all the daggers the other girls are glaring at me!

"Rekka, I actually developed a new type of drug that lets you breathe underwater in order to decrease the number of accidents on planet Berano. Would you let me test it on you? I'll just inject it and then hold your head underwater for ten minutes."

"What a wonderful idea! You always have the best inventions, Shirley. Let's try it right now."

"Huh? Hey, wait, guys..."

They both grabbed my arms and legs, and then Shirley put her medical gun to my neck.

"I'll go get the bathtub filled, okay?"

"Wait, Harissa?!"

Why was she playing along with this?! Fam was just sitting there looking confused. Shirley was cackling like a mad scientist! And Rain's smile was really scary!

"It really is the same as ever."

R, stop watching and help... Wait, are they actually serious? That new drug looks pretty dangerous... I don't know what I did wrong, but I'm sorr—GYAAH!

—Fin—

Afterword

This is the fifth volume of the romantic comedy series with the motto: “You can do anything with love, even overcome the apocalypse!” Hello again to old readers, and hello for the first time to people who bought all five volumes at once.

This turned out to be *Little Apocalypse,* swimsuit and sleepover edition. The gender ratio in the hero’s party is getting completely out of hand. And it’s only going to get worse!

Now, the fifth volume required more help than ever before. There was Nao Watanuki, who kept turning in wonderful illustrations even as the schedule tightened; Nanbu, my editor, who kept checking the drafts every time I rewrote them; Koji Hasegawa, who’s working on the manga version; everyone in HJ Bunko’s editing and sales departments; all the bookstores who put this on their shelves; and all the people who gave me advice about writing volume five. I thank you all so very much.

And with the help of you, my readers, we’ve made it to our first anniversary. I hope you’ll continue to enjoy *I Saved Too Many Girls and Caused the Apocalypse.*

I’m Nao Watanuki, the insert illustrator. Pardon my page of messy scribbles and sketches.

I thought I'd do Squallow for the afterward for volume 5, but he got a surprising amount of pictures so instead it's Rain. I like heroines with long wavy hair like a European Doll, and she fit that perfectly. Not everybody got the same amount of space, but I'm glad I was able to draw everyone in their swimsuits too. My favorite was the tentacles(?) that I really started to enjoy and spend a lot of effort on. I hope they came across as eerie and alive.

Okay, thanks for reading the afterward! I hope we can meet again!

To Mr. Nameko, and all the editors, thank you once more.

By the way, I turned in the rough for the swimsuit picture uncolored so Mr. Nameko decided on the colors for me.

Thank you very much.

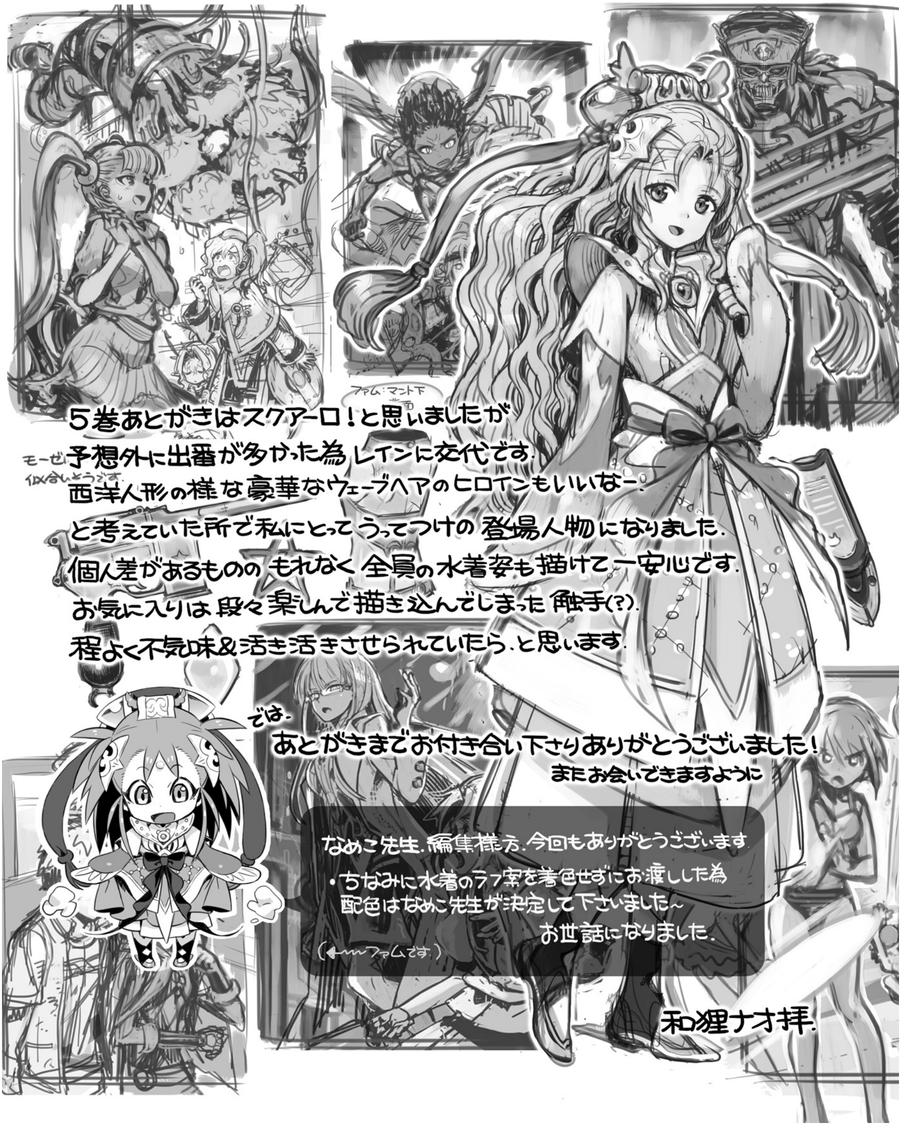
(This is Fam)

Nao Watanuki

:エスタシオン印:

挿絵担当・和狸ナオと申します.

乱文乱筆にて1頁.お邪魔させて頂きます.


ファム：マント下
背面
モーゼ似合いそうです.

5巻あとがきはスクアーロ！と思いましたが
予想外に出番が多かった為 レインに交代です.
西洋人形の様な豪華なウェーブヘアのヒロインもいいなー.
と考えていた所で私にとってうってつけの 登場人物になりました.
個人差があるものの もれなく 全員の水着姿も描けて一安心です.
お気に入りは段々楽しんで描き込んでしまった 触手(?).
程よく不気味&活き活きさせられていたら、と思います.

では.
あとがきまでお付き合い下さりありがとうございました！
またお会いできますように

なめこ先生.編集様方.今回もありがとうございます.
・ちなみに水着のラフ案を着色せずにお渡しした為
配色はなめこ先生が決定して下さいました～
お世話になりました.
(←～ファムです.)

和狸ナオ拝.

Copyright

I Saved Too Many Girls and Caused the Apocalypse: Volume 5
by Namekojirushi

Translated by Adam Lensenmayer
Edited by Megan Denton

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Original Japanese edition published in 2012 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
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Ebook edition 1.0: September 2017